CORONET

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

STORIES THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

BOOK 1

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BOOK 1

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS

Stories that Go Bump in the Night

Book 1

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INTRODUCTION

Good evening.

Once again I act as your guide on a tour through the felonious world of fictitious villainy. First, however, you must allow me to apologise for the title of this volume. I do so at the risk of offending my publisher, a corporate entity composed of many worthy ladies and gentlemen, all engaged in a highly esteemed enterprise – the production of books and the preservation of man's knowledge. As corporate objectives go, perhaps one of the most exalted.

Unfortunately, it is not always a profitable venture. Authors and editors must be compensated, likewise printers, binders and distributors, with a modest lagniappe for stockholders, to say nothing of extortionate tax-collectors and rapacious landlords.

As a consequence, occasionally books must be published that will induce the public to part with its cash. Readers frequently do this for the privilege of being transported into a world of vicarious adventure. And my publisher informs me that a title often helps the process along. I sincerely hope he is right. In a long career I have never spurned financial rewards. Only radicals and pedants equate success with mediocrity.

Readers associate my name with stories that chill and thrill, hence the title of this book. It is not, however, entirely accurate. Oh, yes, there are tales here that should make you perspire and tremble. Nevertheless, I do have a lighter side. Occasionally I relish a smile or a chuckle. And in gathering this collection I came across several yarns that amused me,

and since I am the editor I willy-nilly include them on the theory that a chortle now and then is more beneficent than an apple a day or a massive vitamin shot.

I want my readers to live and prosper and return again when my next collection is due.

The Damned Thing

Ambrose Bierce

By the light of a tallow candle which had been placed on one end of a rough table, a man was reading something written in a book. It was an old account book, greatly worn; and the writing was not very legible, for the man sometimes held the page close to the flame of the candle to get a stronger light on it. The shadow of the book would then throw into obscurity half of the room, darkening a number of faces and figures; for besides the reader, eight other men were present.

Seven of them sat against the rough log walls, silent, motionless, and, the room being small, not very far from the table. By extending an arm any one of them could have touched the eighth man, who lay on the table, face upward, partly covered by a sheet, his arms at his sides. He was dead.

The person reading was the coroner. It was by virtue of his office that he had possession of the book in which he was reading; it had been found among the dead man's effects – in his cabin, where the inquest was now taking place.

When the coroner had finished reading, he put the book into his breast pocket. At that moment the door was pushed open and a young man entered. He, clearly, was not of mountain birth and breeding: he was clad as those who dwell in cities. His clothing was dusty, however, as from travel. He

had, in fact, been riding hard to attend the inquest.

The coroner nodded; no one else greeted him.

The young man smiled. 'I am sorry to have kept you,' he said. 'I went away, not to evade your summons, but to send to my newspaper an account of what I suppose I am called back to relate.'

The coroner smiled.

'The account that you sent to your newspaper,' he said, 'probably differs from that which you will give here under oath.'

'That,' replied the other, rather hotly and with a visible flush, 'is as you please. I have a copy of what I sent. It was not written as news, for it is incredible, but as fiction. It may go as a part of my testimony under oath.'

'But you say it is incredible.'

'That is nothing to you, if I also swear it is true.'

The coroner was silent for a time, his eyes upon the floor. The men about the sides of the cabin talked in whispers, but seldom withdrew their gaze from the face of the corpse. Presently the coroner lifted his eyes and said: 'We will resume the inquest.'

The men removed their hats. The witness was sworn.

'What is your name?' the coroner asked.

'William Harker.'

'Age?'

'Twenty-seven.'

'You knew the deceased, Hugh Morgan?'

'Yes.'

'You were with him when he died?'

'Near him.'

'How did that happen – your presence, I mean?'

'I was visiting him at his place, to shoot and fish. Part of my purpose, however, was to study him and his odd, solitary way of life. He seemed a good model for a character in fiction. I sometimes write stories.'

'I sometimes read them.'

'Thank you.'

'Stories in general – not yours.'

Some of the jurors laughed.

'Relate the circumstances of this man's death,' said the coroner. 'You may use any notes you please.'

The witness understood. He held a manuscript near the candle and, turning the leaves until he found the passage that he wanted, began to read.

' . . . The sun had hardly risen when we left the house. We were looking for quail, each with a shotgun, but we had only one dog. Morgan said that our best ground was beyond a certain ridge that he pointed out, and we crossed it by a trail through the chaparral. On the other side was comparatively level ground, thickly covered with wild oats. As we emerged from the chaparral Morgan was but a few yards in advance. Suddenly we heard, at a little distance to our right and partly in front, a noise as of some animal thrashing about in the bushes, which we could see were violently agitated.

' "We've startled a deer," I said. "I wish we had brought a rifle."

'Morgan, who had stopped and was intently watching the agitated chaparral, said nothing, but had cocked both barrels of his gun and was holding it in readiness to aim. I thought him a trifle excited, which surprised me, for he had a reputation for exceptional coolness, even in moments of sudden and imminent peril.

' "Oh, come," I said. "You are not going to fill up a deer with quail-shot, are you?"

'Still he did not reply; but catching sight of his face as he turned it slightly towards me, I was struck by the intensity of his look. Then I understood that we had serious business in hand, and my first conjecture was that we had "jumped" a grizzly. I advanced to Morgan's side, cocking my gun as I moved.

'The bushes were now quiet and the sound had ceased, but Morgan was as attentive to the place as before.

' "What is it? What the devil is it?" I asked.

' "That Damned Thing!" he replied, without turning his head. His voice was husky and unnatural. He trembled visibly.

'I was about to speak further, when I observed the wild oats near the place of the disturbance moving in the most inexplicable way. I can hardly describe it. The grain seemed to be stirred by a streak of wind, which not only bent it, but pressed it down – crushed it so that it did not rise; and this movement was slowly prolonging itself directly towards ■.

'Nothing that I had ever seen had affected me so strangely as this unfamiliar and unaccountable phenomenon, yet I am unable to recall any sense of fear. However, the apparently causeless movement of the grain, and the slow, undeviating approach of the line of disturbance were distinctly disquieting.

'My companion appeared actually frightened, and I could hardly credit my senses when I saw him suddenly lift his gun to his shoulder and fire both barrels at the agitated grain! Before the smoke of the discharge had cleared away, I heard a loud savage cry – a scream like that of a wild animal. Flinging his gun on the ground, Morgan sprang away and ran swiftly from the spot. At the same instant I was thrown violently to the ground by the impact of something unseen in the smoke – some soft, heavy substance that seemed thrown against me with great force.

'Before I could get on my feet and recover my gun, which seemed to have been struck from my hands, I heard Morgan crying out as if in mortal agony, and mingling with his cries were such hoarse, savage sounds as one hears from fighting dogs. Inexpressibly terrified, I struggled to my feet and looked in the direction of Morgan's retreat; may Heaven in mercy spare me from another sight like that!

'At a distance of less than thirty yards was my friend, down upon one knee, his head thrown back at a frightful angle, hatless, his long hair in disorder, and his whole body in violent movement from side to side, backward and forward. His right arm was lifted and seemed to lack the hand – at least, I could see none. The other arm was invisible.

'At times, as my memory now reports this extraordinary scene, I could discern but a part of his body; it was as if he

had been partly blotted out – I cannot otherwise express it – then a shifting of his position would bring it all into view again.

'All this must have occurred within a few seconds, yet in that time Morgan assumed all the postures of a determined wrestler vanquished by superior weight and strength. I saw nothing but him, and him not always distinctly. During the entire incident his shouts and curses were heard, as if through an enveloping uproar of such sounds of rage and fury as I had never heard from the throat of man or brute!

'For a moment only I stood irresolute, then throwing down my gun I ran forward to my friend's assistance. I had a vague belief that he was suffering from a fit, or some form of convulsion. Before I could reach his side, he was prone and quiet.

'All sounds had ceased, but with a feeling of such terror as even these awful events had not inspired I now saw again the mysterious movement of the wild oats, prolonging itself from the trampled area about the prostrate man towards the edge of the wood. It was only when it had reached the wood that I was able to withdraw my eyes and look at my companion. He was dead.'

The coroner rose from his seat and stood beside the dead man. Lifting an edge of the sheet he pulled it away, exposing the entire body, altogether naked and showing in the candlelight a claylike yellow. It had, however, broad marks of bluish black, obviously caused by extravasated blood from contusions. The chest and sides looked as if they had been beaten with a bludgeon. There were dreadful lacerations; the skin was torn in strips and shreds.

The coroner moved round to the end of the table and undid a silk handkerchief which had been passed under the chin and knotted on the top of the head. When the handkerchief was drawn away, it exposed what had been the throat. Some of the jurors who had risen to get a better view repented their curiosity and turned away their faces. Witness Harker went to the open window and leaned across the sill, faint and sick.

Dropping the handkerchief upon the dead man's neck, the

coroner stepped to a corner of the room and from a pile of clothing produced one garment after another, each of which he held up a moment for inspection. All were torn, and stiff with blood.

'Gentlemen,' the coroner said, 'we have no more evidence, I think. Your duty has been already explained to you; if there is nothing you wish to ask, you may go outside and consider your verdict.'

The foreman rose – a tall, bearded man of sixty. 'I should like to ask one question, Mr. Coroner,' he said. 'What asylum did yer witness escape from?'

'Mr. Harker,' said the coroner, gravely and tranquilly, 'from what asylum did you last escape?'

Harker flushed crimson again but said nothing, and the seven jurors rose and solemnly filed out of the cabin.

'If you have finished insulting me, sir,' said Harker, as soon as he and the officer were left alone with the dead man, 'I suppose I am at liberty to go?'

'Yes.'

Harker started to leave, but paused, with his hand on the door latch. The habit of his profession was strong in him – stronger than his sense of personal dignity. He turned about and said:

'The book that you have there – I recognise it as Morgan's diary. You seemed greatly interested in it; you read in it while I was testifying. May I see it? The public would like –'

'The book will cut no figure in this matter,' replied the official, slipping it into his coat pocket; 'all the entries in it were made before the writer's death.'

As Harker passed out of the house, the jury re-entered and stood about the table, on which the now covered corpse showed under the sheet with sharp definition. The foreman seated himself near the candle, produced from his breast pocket a pencil and scrap of paper, and wrote rather laboriously the following verdict, which with various degrees of effort all signed:

'We, the jury, do find that the remains come to their death at the hands of a mountain lion, but some of us thinks, all the same, they had fits.'

In the diary of the late Hugh Morgan are certain interesting entries, which may possibly have some scientific value. At the inquest upon his body, the book was not put in evidence; possibly the coroner thought it not worth while to confuse the jury. The date of the first of the entries cannot be ascertained; the upper part of the leaf is torn away; the part of the entry remaining follows:

' . . . would run in a half-circle, keeping his head turned always towards the centre, and again he would stand still, barking furiously. At last he ran away into the brush as fast as he could go. I thought at first that he had gone mad, but on returning to the house found no other alteration in his manner than what was obviously due to fear of punishment.

'Can a dog see with his nose? Do odours impress some cerebral centre with images of the thing that emitted them . . . ?

'Sept. 2 – looking at the stars last night, as they rose above the crest of the ridge east of the house, I observed them successively disappear – from left to right. Each was eclipsed but an instant, and only a few at the same time, but along the entire length of the ridge all that were within a degree or two of the crest were blotted out. It was as if something had passed along between me and them; but I could not see it, and the stars were not thick enough to define its outline. Ugh! I don't like this. It worries me.'

Several weeks entries are missing, three leaves being torn from the book.

'Sept. 27 – It has been about here again – I find evidences of its presence every day. I watched again all last night in the same cover, gun in hand, double-charged with buckshot. In the morning the fresh footprints were there, as before. Yet I would have sworn that I did not sleep – indeed, I hardly sleep at all. It is terrible, insupportable! If these amazing

experiences are real, I shall go mad; if they are fanciful, I am mad already.

'Oct. 3 – I shall not go – it shall not drive me away. No, this is *my* house, *my* land. God hates a coward. . . .

'Oct. 5 – I can stand it no longer; I have invited Harker to pass a few weeks with me – he has a level head. I can judge from his manner if he thinks me mad.

'Oct. 7 – I have the solution of the mystery; it came to me last night – suddenly, as by revelation. How simple – how terribly simple!

'There are sounds that we cannot hear. At either end of the scale are notes that stir no chord of that imperfect instrument, the human ear. They are too high or too grave. I have observed a flock of blackbirds occupying an entire tree-top – the tops of several trees – and all in full song. Suddenly – in a moment – at absolutely the same instant – all spring into the air and fly away. How? They could not all see one another – whole tree-tops intervened. At no point could a leader have been visible to all.

'There must have been a signal of warning or command, high and shrill above the din, but by me unheard. I have observed, too, the same simultaneous flight when all were silent, among not only blackbirds, but other birds – quail, for example, widely separated by bushes – even on opposite sides of a hill.

'It is known to seamen that a school of whales basking or sporting on the surface of the ocean, miles apart, with the convexity of the earth between, will sometimes dive at the same instant – all gone out of sight in a moment. The signal has been sounded – too grave for the ear of the sailor at the masthead and his comrades on the deck – who nevertheless feel its vibrations in the ship, as the stones of a cathedral are stirred by the bass of the organ.

'As with sounds, so with colours. At each end of the solar spectrum the chemist can detect the presence of what are known as "actinic" rays. They represent colours – integral colours in the composition of light – which we are unable to discern. The human eye is an imperfect instrument; its

range is but a few octaves of the real "chromatic scale". I am not mad; there are colours that we cannot see.

'And, God help me! the Damned Thing is of such a colour!'

Edward the Conqueror

Roald Dahl

Louisa, holding a dishcloth in her hand, stepped out the kitchen door at the back of the house into the cool October sunshine.

'Edward!' she called. '*Ed-ward!* Lunch is ready!'

She paused a moment, listening; then she strolled out on to the lawn and continued across it – a little shadow attending her – skirting the rose bed and touching the sundial lightly with one finger as she went by. She moved rather gracefully for a woman who was small and plump, with a lilt in her walk and a gentle swinging of the shoulders and the arms. She passed under the mulberry tree on to the brick path, then went all the way along the path until she came to the place where she could look down into the dip at the end of this large garden.

'*Edward!* Lunch!'

She could see him now, about eighty yards away, down in the dip on the edge of the wood – the tallish narrow figure in khaki slacks and dark-green sweater, working beside a big bonfire with a fork in his hands, pitching brambles on to the top of the fire. It was blazing fiercely, with orange flames and clouds of milky smoke, and the smoke was drifting back over

the garden with a wonderful scent of autumn and burning leaves.

Louisa went down the slope towards her husband. Had she wanted, she could easily have called again and made herself heard, but there was something about a first-class bonfire that impelled her towards it, right up close so she could feel the heat and listen to it burn.

'Lunch,' she said, approaching.

'Oh, hello. All right – yes. I'm coming.'

'*What* a good fire.'

'I've decided to clear this place right out,' her husband said. 'I'm sick and tired of all these brambles.' His long face was wet with perspiration. There were small beads of it clinging all over his moustache like dew, and two little rivers were running down his throat on to the turtleneck of the sweater.

'You better be careful you don't overdo it, Edward.'

'Louisa, I do wish you'd stop treating me as though I were eighty. A bit of exercise never did anyone any harm.'

'Yes, dear, I know. Oh, Edward! Look! Look!'

The man turned and looked at Louisa, who was pointing now to the far side of the bonfire.

'Look, Edward! The cat!'

Sitting on the ground, so close to the fire that the flames sometimes seemed actually to be touching it, was a large cat of a most unusual colour. It stayed quite still, with its head on one side and its nose in the air, watching the man and woman with a cool yellow eye.

'It'll get burnt!' Louisa cried, and she dropped the dishcloth and darted swiftly in and grabbed it with both hands, whisking it away and putting it on the grass well clear of the flames.

'You crazy cat,' she said, dusting off her hands. 'What's the matter with you?'

'Cats know what they're doing,' the husband said. 'You'll never find a cat doing something it doesn't want. Not cats.'

'Whose is it? You ever seen it before?'

'No, I never have. Damn peculiar colour.'

The cat had seated itself on the grass and was regarding

them with a sidewise look. There was a veiled inward expression about the eyes, something curiously omniscient and pensive, and around the nose a most delicate air of contempt, as though the sight of these two middle-aged persons – the one small, plump, and rosy, the other lean and extremely sweaty – were a matter of some surprise but very little importance. For a cat, it certainly had an unusual colour – a pure silvery grey with no blue in it at all – and the hair was very long and silky.

Louisa bend down and stroked its head. 'You must go home,' she said. 'Be a good cat now and go on home to where you belong.'

The man and wife started to stroll back up the hill towards the house. The cat got up and followed, at a distance first, but edging closer and closer as they went along. Soon it was alongside them, then it was ahead, leading the way across the lawn to the house, and walking as though it owned the whole place, holding its tail straight up in the air, like a mast.

'Go home,' the man said. 'Go on home. We don't want you.'

But when they reached the house, it came in with them, and Louisa gave it some milk in the kitchen. During lunch, it hopped up on to the spare chair between them and sat through the meal with its head just above the level of the table, watching the proceedings with those dark yellow eyes which kept moving slowly from the woman to the man and back again.

'I don't like this cat,' Edward said.

'Oh, I think it's a beautiful cat. I do hope it stays a little while.'

'Now, listen to me, Louisa. The creature can't possibly stay here. It belongs to someone else. It's lost. And if it's still trying to hang around this afternoon, you'd better take it to the police. They'll see it gets home.'

After lunch, Edward returned to his gardening. Louisa, as usual, went to the piano. She was a competent pianist and a genuine music-lover, and almost every afternoon she spent an hour or so playing for herself. The cat was now lying on the

sofa, and she paused to stroke it as she went by. It opened its eyes, looked at her a moment, then closed them again and went back to sleep.

'You're an awfully nice cat,' she said. 'And such a beautiful colour. I wish I could keep you.' Then her fingers, moving over the fur on the cat's head, came into contact with a small lump, a little growth just above the right eye.

'Poor cat,' she said. 'You've got bumps on your beautiful face. You must be getting old.'

She went over and sat down on the long piano bench, but she didn't immediately start to play. One of her special little pleasures was to make every day a kind of concert day, with a carefully arranged programme which she worked out in detail before she began. She never liked to break her enjoyment by having to stop while she wondered what to play next. All she wanted was a brief pause after each piece while the audience clapped enthusiastically and called for more. It was so much nicer to imagine an audience, and now and again while she was playing – on the lucky days, that is – the room would begin to swim and fade and darken, and she would see nothing but row upon row of seats and a sea of white faces upturned towards her, listening with a rapt and adoring concentration.

Sometimes she played from memory, sometimes from music. Today she would play from memory; that was the way she felt. And what should the programme be? She sat before the piano with her small hands clasped on her lap, a plump rosy little person with a round and still quite pretty face, her hair done up in a neat bun at the back of her head. By looking slightly to the right, she could see the cat curled up asleep on the sofa, and its silvery-grey coat was beautiful against the purple of the cushion. How about some Bach to begin with? Or, better still, Vivaldi. The Bach adaptation for organ of the D minor Concerto Grosso. Yes – that first. Then perhaps a little Schumann. *Carnaval?* That would be fun. And after that – well, a touch of Liszt for a change. One of the *Petrarch Sonnets.* The second one – that was the loveliest – the E major. Then another Schumann, another of his gay ones –

Kinderscenen. And lastly, for the encore, a Brahms waltz, or maybe two of them if she felt like it.

Vivaldi, Schumann, Liszt, Schumann, Brahms. A very nice programme, one that she could play easily without the music. She moved herself a little closer to the piano and paused a moment while someone in the audience – already she could feel that this was one of the lucky days – while someone in the audience had his last cough; then, with the slow grace that accompanied nearly all her movements, she lifted her hands to the keyboard and began to play.

She wasn't at that particular moment, watching the cat at all – as a matter of fact she had forgotten its presence – but as the first deep notes of the Vivaldi sounded softly in the room, she became aware, out of the corner of one eye, of a sudden flurry, a flash of movement on the sofa to her right. She stopped playing at once. 'What is it?' she said, turning to the cat. 'What's the matter?'

The animal, who a few seconds before had been sleeping peacefully, was now sitting bolt upright on the sofa, very tense, the whole body aquiver, ears up and eyes wide open, staring at the piano.

'Did I frighten you?' she asked gently. 'Perhaps you've never heard music before.'

No, she told herself. I don't think that's what it is. On second thought, it seemed to her that the cat's attitude was not one of fear. There was no shrinking or backing away. If anything, there was a leaning forward, a kind of eagerness about the creature, and the face – well, there was a rather an odd expression on the face, something of a mixture between surprise and shock. Of course, the face of a cat is a small and fairly expressionless thing, but if you watch carefully the eyes and ears working together, and particularly that little area of mobile skin below the ears and slightly to one side, you can occasionally see the reflection of very powerful emotions. Louisa was watching the face closely now, and because she was curious to see what would happen a second time, she reached out her hands to the keyboard and began to play Vivaldi.

This time the cat was ready for it, and all that happened to begin with was a small extra tensing of the body. But as the music swelled and quickened into that first exciting rhythm of the introduction to the fugue, a strange look that amounted almost to ecstasy began to settle upon the creature's face. The ears, which up to then had been pricked up straight, were gradually drawn back, the eyelids drooped, the head went over to one side, and at that moment Louisa could have sworn that the animal was actually *appreciating* the work.

What she saw (or thought she saw) was something she had noticed many times on the faces of people listening very closely to a piece of music. When the sound takes complete hold of them and drowns them in itself, a peculiar, intensely ecstatic look comes over them that you can recognise as easily as a smile. So far as Louisa could see, the cat was now wearing almost exactly this kind of look.

Louisa finished the fugue, then played the siciliana, and all the way through she kept watching the cat on the sofa. The final proof for her that the animal was listening came at the end, when the music stopped. It blinked, stirred itself a little, stretched a leg, settled into a more comfortable position, took a quick glance round the room, then looked expectantly in her direction. It was precisely the way a concertgoer reacts when the music momentarily releases him in the pause between two movements of a symphony. The behaviour was so thoroughly human it gave her a queer agitated feeling in the chest.

'You like that?' she asked. 'You like Vivaldi?'

The moment she'd spoken, she felt ridiculous, but not – and this to her was a trifle sinister – not quite so ridiculous as she knew she should have felt.

Well, there was nothing for it now except to go straight ahead with the next number on the programme, which was *Carnaval*. As soon as she began to play, the cat again stiffened and sat up straighter; then, as it became slowly and blissfully saturated with the sound, it relapsed into that queer melting mood of ecstasy that seemed to have something to

do with drowning and with dreaming. It was really an extravagant sight – quite a comical one, too – to see this silvery cat sitting on the sofa and being carried away like this. And what made it more screwy than ever, Louisa thought, was the fact that this music, which the animal seemed to be enjoying so much, was manifestly too *difficult*, too *classical*, to be appreciated by the majority of humans in the world.

Maybe, she thought, the creature's not really enjoying it at all. Maybe it's a sort of hypnotic reaction, like with snakes. After all, if you can charm a snake with music, then why not a cat? Except that millions of cats hear the stuff every day of their lives, on radio and gramophone and piano, and, as far as she knew, there'd never been a case of one behaving like this. This one was acting as though it were following every single note. It was certainly a fantastic thing.

But was it not also a wonderful thing? Indeed it was. In fact, unless she was much mistaken, it was a kind of miracle, one of those animal miracles that happen about once every hundred years.

'I could see you *loved* that one,' she said when the piece was over. 'Although I'm sorry I didn't play it any too well today. Which did you like best – the Vivaldi or the Schumann?'

The cat made no reply, so Louisa, fearing she might lose the attention of her listener, went straight into the next part of the programme – Liszt's second *Petrarch Sonnet*.

And now an extraordinary thing happened. She hadn't played more than three or four bars when the animal's whiskers began perceptibly to twitch. Slowly it drew itself up to an extra height, laid its head on one side, then on the other, and stared into space with a kind of frowning concentrated look that seemed to say, 'What's this? Don't tell me. I know it so well, but just for the moment I don't seem to be able to place it.' Louisa was fascinated, and with her little mouth half open and half smiling, she continued to play, waiting to see what on earth was going to happen next.

The cat stood up, walked to one end of the sofa, sat down again, listened some more; then all at once it bounded to the

floor and leaped up on to the piano bench beside her. There it sat, listening intently to the lovely sonnet, not dreamily this time, but very erect, the large yellow eyes fixed upon Louisa's fingers.

'Well!' she said as she struck the last chord. 'So you came up to sit beside me, did you? You like this better than the sofa? All right, I'll let you stay, but you must keep still and not jump about.' She put out a hand and stroked the cat softly along the back, from head to tail. 'That was Liszt,' she went on. 'Mind you, he can sometimes be quite horribly vulgar, but in things like this he's really charming.'

She was beginning to enjoy this odd animal pantomime, so she went straight on into the next item on the programme, Schumann's *Kinderscenen.*

She hadn't been playing for more than a minute or two when she realised that the cat had again moved, and was now back in its old place on the sofa. She'd been watching her hands at the time, and presumably that was why she hadn't even noticed its going; all the same, it must have been an extremely swift and silent move. The cat was still staring at her, still apparently attending closely to the music, and yet it seemed to Louisa that there was not now the same rapturous enthusiasm there'd been during the previous piece, the Liszt. In addition, the act of leaving the stool and returning to the sofa appeared in itself to be a mild but positive gesture of disappointment.

'What's the matter?' she asked when it was over, 'What's wrong with Schumann? What's so marvellous about Liszt?' The cat looked straight back at her with those yellow eyes that had small jet-black bars lying vertically in their centres.

This, she told herself, is really beginning to get interesting – a trifle spooky, too, when she came to think of it. But one look at the cat sitting there on the sofa, so bright and attentive, so obviously waiting for more music, quickly reassured her.

'All right,' she said. 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to alter my programme specially for you. You seem to like Liszt so much, I'll give you another.'

She hesitated, searching her memory for a good Liszt; then

softly she began to play one of the twelve little pieces from *Der Weihnachtsbaum*. She was now watching the cat very closely, and the first thing she noticed was that the whiskers again began to twitch. It jumped down to the carpet, stood still a moment, inclining its head, quivering with excitement, and then, with a slow, silky stride, it walked around the piano, hopped up on the bench, and sat down beside her.

They were in the middle of all this when Edward came in from the garden.

'Edward!' Louisa cried, jumping up. 'Oh, Edward, darling! Listen to this! Listen what's happened!'

'What is it now?' he said. 'I'd like some tea.' He had one of those narrow, sharp-nosed, faintly magenta faces, and the sweat was making it shine as though it were a long wet grape.

'It's the cat!' Louisa cried, pointing to it sitting quietly on the piano bench. 'Just *wait* till you hear what's happened!'

'I thought I told you to take it to the police.'

'But, Edward, *listen* to me. This is *terribly* exciting. This is a *musical* cat.'

'Oh, yes?'

'This cat can appreciate music, and it can understand it too.'

'Now stop this nonsense, Louisa, and let's for God's sake have some tea. I'm hot and tired from cutting brambles and building bonfires.' He sat down in an armchair, took a cigarette from a box beside him, and lit it with an immense patent lighter that stood near the box.

'What you don't understand,' Louisa said, 'is that something extremely exciting has been happening here in our own house while you were out, something that may even be . . . well . . . almost momentous.'

'I'm quite sure of that.'

'Edward, *please*!'

Louisa was standing by the piano, her little pink face pinker than ever, a scarlet rose high up on each cheek. 'If you want to know,' she said, 'I'll tell you what I think'

'I'm listening, dear.'

'I think it might be possible that we are at this moment sitting in the presence of –' She stopped, as though suddenly sensing the absurdity of the thought.

'Yes?'

'You may think it silly, Edward, but it's honestly what I think.'

'In the presence of whom, for heaven's sake?'

'Of Franz Liszt himself!'

Her husband took a long slow pull at his cigarette and blew the smoke up at the ceiling. He had the tight-skinned, concave cheeks of a man who has worn a full set of dentures for many years, and every time he sucked at a cigarette, the cheeks went in even more, and the bones of his face stood out like a skeleton's. 'I don't get you,' he said.

'Edward, listen to me. From what I've seen this afternoon with my own eyes, it really looks as though this might actually be some sort of reincarnation.'

'You mean this lousy cat?'

'Don't talk like that, dear, please.'

'You're not ill, are you, Louisa?'

'I'm perfectly all right, thank you very much. I'm a bit confused – I don't mind admitting it, but who wouldn't be after what's happened? Edward, I swear to you –'

'What *did* happen, if I may ask?'

Louisa told him, and all the while she was speaking, her husband lay sprawled in the chair with his legs stretched out in front of him, sucking at his cigarette and blowing the smoke up at the ceiling. There was a thin cynical smile on his mouth.

'I don't see anything very unusual about that,' he said when it was over. 'All it is – it's a trick cat. It's been taught tricks, that's all.'

'Don't be so silly, Edward. Every time I play Liszt, he gets all excited and comes running over to sit on the stool beside me. But only for Liszt, and nobody can teach a cat the difference between Liszt and Schumann. You don't even know it yourself. But this one can do it every single time. Quite obscure Liszt, too.'

'Twice,' the husband said. 'He's only done it twice.'

'Twice is enough.'

'Let's see him do it again. Come on.'

'No,' Louisa said. 'Definitely not. Because if this *is* Liszt, as I believe it is, or anyway the soul of Liszt or whatever it is that comes back, then it's certainly not right or even very kind to put him through a lot of silly undignified tests.'

'My dear woman! This is a *cat* – a rather stupid grey cat that nearly got its coat singed by the bonfire this morning in the garden. And anyway, what do you know about reincarnation?'

'If his soul is there, that's enough for me,' Louisa said firmly. 'That's all that counts.'

'Come on then. Let's see him perform. Let's see him tell the difference between his own stuff and someone else's.'

'No, Edward. I've told you before, I refuse to put him through any more silly circus tests. He's had quite enough of that for one day. But I'll tell you what I *will* do. I'll play him a little more of his own music.'

'A fat lot that'll prove.'

'You watch. And one thing is certain – as soon as he recognises it, he'll refuse to budge off that bench where he's sitting now.'

Louisa went to the music shelf, took down a book of Liszt, thumbed through it quickly, and chose another of his finer compositions – the B minor Sonata. She had meant to play only the first part of the work, but once she got started and saw how the cat was sitting there literally quivering with pleasure and watching her hands with that rapturous concentrated look, she didn't have the heart to stop. She played it all the way through. When it was finished, she glanced up at her husband and smiled. 'There you are,' she said. 'You can't tell me he wasn't absolutely *loving* it.'

'He just likes the noise, that's all.'

'He was *loving* it. Weren't you, darling?' she said, lifting the cat in her arms. 'Oh, my goodness, if only he could talk. Just think of it, dear – he met Beethoven in his youth! He knew Schubert and Mendelssohn and Schumann and Berlioz

and Grieg and Delacroix and Ingres and Heine and Balzac. And let me see . . . My heavens, he was Wagner's father-in-law! I'm holding Wagner's father-in-law in my arms!'

'Louisa!' her husband said sharply, sitting up straight. 'Pull yourself together.' There was a new edge to his voice now, and he spoke louder.

Louisa glanced up quickly. 'Edward, I do believe you're jealous!'

'Oh, sure, sure I'm jealous – of a lousy grey cat!'

'Then don't be so grumpy and cynical about it all. If you're going to behave like this, the best thing you can do is to go back to your gardening and leave the two of us together in peace. That will be best for all of us, won't it, darling?' she said, addressing the cat, stroking its head. 'And later on this evening, we shall have some more music together, you and I, some more of your own work. Oh, yes,' she said, kissing the creature several times on the neck, 'and we might have a little Chopin, too. You needn't tell me – I happen to know you adore Chopin. You used to be great friends with him, didn't you, darling? As a matter of fact – if I remember rightly – it was in Chopin's apartment that you met the great love of your life, Madame Something-or-Other. Had three illegitimate children by her, too, didn't you? Yes, you did, you naughty thing, and don't go trying to deny it. So you shall have some Chopin,' she said, kissing the cat again, 'and that'll probably bring back all sorts of lovely memories to you, won't it?'

'Louisa, stop this at once!'

'Oh, don't be so stuffy, Edward.'

'You're behaving like a perfect idiot, woman. And anyway, you forget we're going out this evening, to Bill and Betty's for canasta.'

'Oh, but I couldn't *possibly* go out now. There's no question of that.'

Edward got up slowly from his chair, then bent down and stubbed his cigarette hard into the ashtray. 'Tell me something,' he said quietly. 'You don't really believe this – this twaddle you're talking, do you?'

'But of *course* I do. I don't think there's any question about it now. And, what's more, I consider that it puts a tremendous responsibility upon us, Edward – upon both of us. You as well.'

'You know what I think,' he said. 'I think you ought to see a doctor. And damn quick, too.'

With that, he turned and stalked out of the room, through the French windows, back into the garden.

Louisa watched him striding across the lawn towards his bonfire and his brambles, and she waited until he was out of sight before she turned and ran to the front door, still carrying the cat.

Soon she was in the car, driving to town.

She parked in front of the library, locked the cat in the car, hurried up the steps into the building, and headed straight for the reference room. There she began searching the cards for books on two subjects – REINCARNATION and LISZT.

Under REINCARNATION she found something Called *Recurring Earth-Lives – How and Why,* by a man called F. Milton Willis, published in 1921. Under LISZT she found two biographical volumes. She took out all three books, returned to the car, and drove home.

Back in the house, she placed the cat on the sofa, sat herself down beside it with her three books, and prepared to do some serious reading. She would begin, she decided, with Mr. F. Milton Willis's work. The volume was thin and a trifle soiled, but it had a good heavy feel to it, and the author's name had an authoritative ring.

The doctrine of reincarnation, she read, states that spiritual souls pass from higher to higher forms of animals. 'A man can, for instance, no more be reborn as an animal than an adult can re-become a child.'

She read this again. But how did he know? How could he be so sure? He couldn't. No one could possibly be certain about a thing like that. At the same time, the statement took a great deal of the wind out of her sails.

'Around the centre of consciousness of each of us, there are,

besides the dense outer body, four other bodies, invisible to the eye of flesh, but perfectly visible to people whose faculties of perception of superphysical things have undergone the requisite development . . .'

She didn't understand that one at all, but she read on, and soon she came to an interesting passage that told how long a soul usually stayed away from the earth before returning in someone else's body. The time varied according to type, and Mr. Willis gave the following breakdown:

Drunkards and the unemployable	40/50	*years*
Unskilled labourers	60/100	"
Skilled workers	100/200	"
The bourgeoisie	200/300	"
The upper-middle classes	500	"
The highest class of gentleman farmers	600/1000	"
Those in the Path of Initiation	1500/2000	"

Quickly she referred to one of the other books, to find out how long Liszt had been dead. It said he died in Bayreuth in 1886. That was sixty-seven years ago. Therefore, according to Mr. Willis, he'd have to have been an unskilled labourer to come back so soon. That didn't seem to fit at all. On the other hand, she didn't think much of the author's methods of grading. According to him, 'the highest class of gentleman farmers' was just about the most superior being on the earth. Red jackets and stirrup cups and the bloody, sadistic murder of the fox. No, she thought, that isn't right. It was a pleasure to find herself beginning to doubt Mr. Willis.

Later in the book, she came upon a list of some of the more famous reincarnations. Epictetus, she was told, returned to earth as Ralph Waldo Emerson. Cicero came back as Gladstone, Alfred the Great as Queen Victoria, William the Conqueror as Lord Kitchener, Ashoka Vardhana, King of India in 272 B.C., came back as Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, an esteemed American lawyer. Pythagoras returned as Master Koot Hoomi, the gentleman who founded the

Theosophical Society with Mme Blavatsky and Colonel H. S. Olcott (the esteemed American lawyer, alias Ashoka Vardhana, King of India). It didn't say who Mme Blavatsky had been. But 'Theodore Roosevelt,' it said, 'has for numbers of incarnations played great parts as a leader of men . . . From him descended the royal line of ancient Chaldea, he having been, about 30,000 B.C., appointed Governor of Chaldea by the Ego we know as Caesar who was then ruler of Persia . . . Roosevelt and Caesar have been together time after time as military and administrative leaders; at one time, thousands of years ago, they were husband and wife . . .'

That was enough for Louisa. Mr. F. Milton Willis was clearly nothing but a guesser. She was not impressed by his dogmatic assertions. The fellow was probably on the right track, but his pronouncements were extravagant, especially the first one of all, about animals. Soon she hoped to be able to confound the whole Theosophical Society with her proof that man could indeed reappear as a lower animal. Also that he did not have to be an unskilled labourer to come back within a hundred years.

She now turned to one of the Liszt biographies, and she was glancing through it casually when her husband came in again from the garden.

'What are you doing now?' he asked.

'Oh – just checking up a little here and there. Listen, my dear, did you know that Theodore Roosevelt once was Caesar's wife?'

'Louisa,' he said, 'look – why don't we stop this nonsense? I don't like to see you making a fool of yourself like this. Just give me that goddamn cat and I'll take it to the police station myself.'

Louisa didn't seem to hear him. She was staring open-mouthed at a picture of Liszt in the book that lay on her lap. 'My God!' she cried. 'Edward, look!'

'What?'

'Look! The warts on his face! I forgot all about them! He had these great warts on his face and it was a famous thing. Even his students used to cultivate little tufts of hair on their

own faces in the same spots, just to be like him.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Nothing. I mean not the students. But the warts have.'

'Oh, Christ,' the man said. 'Oh, Christ God Almighty.'

'The cat has them, too! Look, I'll show you.'

She took the animal on to her lap and began examining its face. 'There! There's one! And there's another! Wait a minute! I do believe they're in the same places! Where's that picture?'

It was a famous portrait of the musician in his old age, showing the fine powerful face framed in a mass of long grey hair that covered his ears and came halfway down his neck. On the face itself, each large wart had been faithfully reproduced, and there were five of them in all.

'Now, in the picture there's *one* above the right eyebrow.' She looked above the right eyebrow of the cat. 'Yes! It's there! In exactly the same place! And another on the left, at the top of the nose. That one's there, too! And one just below it on the cheek. And two fairly close together under the chin on the right side. Edward! Edward! Come and look! They're exactly the same.'

'It doesn't prove a thing.'

She looked up at her husband who was standing in the centre of the room in his green sweater and khaki slacks, still perspiring freely. 'You're scared, aren't you, Edward? Scared of losing your precious dignity and having people think you might be making a fool of yourself just for once.'

'I refuse to get hysterical about it, that's all.'

Louisa turned back to the book and began reading some more. 'This is interesting,' she said. 'It says here that Liszt loved all of Chopin's works except one – the Scherzo in B flat minor. Apparently he hated that. He called it the "Governess Scherzo", and said that it ought to be reserved solely for people in that profession.'

'So what?'

'Edward, listen. As you insist on being so horrid about all this, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to play this

Scherzo right now and you can stay here and see what happens.'

'And then maybe you will deign to get us some supper.'

Louisa got up and took from the shelf a large green volume containing all of Chopin's works. 'Here it is. Oh yes, I remember it. It *is* rather awful. Now, listen – or, rather, watch. Watch to see what he does.'

She placed the music on the piano and sat down. Her husband remained standing. He had his hands in his pockets and a cigarette in his mouth, and in spite of himself he was watching the cat, which was now dozing on the sofa. When Louisa began to play, the first effect was as dramatic as ever. The animal jumped up as though it had been stung, and it stood motionless for at least a minute, the ears pricked up, the whole body quivering. Then it became restless and began to walk back and forth along the length of the sofa. Finally, it hopped down on to the floor, and with its nose and tail held high in the air, it marched slowly, majestically, from the room.

'There!' Louisa cried, jumping up and running after it. 'That does it! That really proves it!' She came back carrying the cat which she put down again on the sofa. Her whole face was shining with excitement now, her fists were clenched white, and the little bun on top of her head was loosening and going over to one side. 'What about it, Edward? What d'you think?' She was laughing nervously as she spoke.

'I must say it was quite amusing.'

'*Amusing!* My dear Edward, it's the most wonderful thing that's ever happened! Oh, goodness me!' she cried, picking up the cat again and hugging it to her bosom. 'Isn't it marvellous to think we've got Franz Liszt staying in the house?'

'Now, Louisa. Don't let's get hysterical.'

'I can't help it, I simply can't. And to imagine that he's actually going to live with us for always!'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Oh, Edward! I can hardly talk from excitement. And d'you know what I'm going to do next? Every musician in

the whole world is going to want to meet him, that's a fact, and ask him about the people he knew – about Beethoven and Chopin and Schubert –'

'He can't talk,' her husband said.

'Well – all right. But they're going to want to meet him anyway, just to see him and touch him and to play their own music to him, modern music he's never heard before.'

'He wasn't that great. Now, if it had been Bach or Beethoven . . .'

'Don't interrupt, Edward, please. So what I'm going to do is to notify all the important living composers everywhere. It's my duty. I'll tell them Liszt is here, and invite them to visit him. And you know what? They'll come flying in from every corner of the earth!'

'To see a grey cat?'

'Darling, it's the same thing. It's *him*. No one cares what he *looks* like. Oh, Edward, it'll be the most exciting thing there ever was!'

'They'll think you're mad.'

'You wait and see.' She was holding the cat in her arms and petting it tenderly but looking across at her husband, who now walked over to the French windows and stood there staring out into the garden. The evening was beginning, and the lawn was turning slowly from green to black, and in the distance he could see the smoke from his bonfire rising straight up in a white column.

'No,' he said, without turning round. 'I'm not having it. Not in this house. It'll make us both look perfect fools.'

'Edward, what do you mean?'

'Just what I say. I absolutely refuse to have you stirring up a lot of publicity about a foolish thing like this. You happen to have found a trick cat. O.K. – that's fine. Keep it, if it pleases you. I don't mind But I don't wish you to go any further than that Do you understand me, Louisa?'

'Further than what?'

'I don't want to hear any more of this crazy talk. You're acting like a lunatic.'

Louisa put the cat slowly down on the sofa. Then slowly

she raised herself to her full small height and took one pace forward. '*Damn* you, Edward!' she shouted, stamping her foot. 'For the first time in our lives something really exciting comes along and you're scared to death of having anything to do with it because someone may laugh at you! That's right, isn't it? You can't deny it, can you?'

'Louisa,' her husband said. 'That's quite enough of that. Pull yourself together now and stop this at once.' He walked over and took a cigarette from the box on the table, then lit it with the enormous patent lighter. His wife stood watching him, and now the tears were beginning to trickle out of the inside corners of her eyes, making two little shiny rivers where they ran through the powder on her cheeks.

'We've been having too many of these scenes just lately, Louisa,' he was saying. 'No, no, don't interrupt. Listen to me. I make full allowance for the fact that this may be an awkward time of life for you, and that –'

'Oh, my God! You idiot! You pompous idiot! Can't you see that this is different, this is – this is something miraculous? Can't you see *that*?'

At that point, he came across the room and took her firmly by the shoulders. He had the freshly lit cigarette between his lips, and she could see faint contours on his skin where the heavy perspiration had dried in patches. 'Listen,' he said. 'I'm hungry. I've given up my golf and I've been working all day in the garden, and I'm tired and hungry and I want some supper. So do you. Off you go now to the kitchen and get us both something good to eat.'

Louisa stepped back and put both hands to her mouth. 'My heavens!' she cried. 'I forgot all about it. He must be absolutely famished. Except for some milk, I haven't given him a thing to eat since he arrived.'

'Who?'

'Why, *him*, of course. I must go at once and cook something really special. I wish I knew what his favourite dishes used to be. What do you think he would like best, Edward?'

'*Goddamn* it, Louisa!'

'Now, Edward, please. I'm going to handle this *my* way

just for once. You stay here,' she said, bending down and touching the cat gently with her fingers. 'I won't be long.'

Louisa went into the kitchen and stood for a moment, wondering what special dish she might prepare. How about a soufflé? A nice cheese soufflé? Yes, that would be rather special. Of course, Edward didn't much care for them, but that couldn't be helped.

She was only a fair cook, and she couldn't be sure of always having a soufflé come out well, but she took extra trouble this time and waited a long while to make certain the oven had heated fully to the correct temperature. While the soufflé was baking and she was searching around for something to go with it, it occurred to her that Liszt had probably never in his life tasted either avocado pears or grapefruit, so she decided to give him both of them at once in a salad. It would be fun to watch his reaction. It really would.

When it was all ready, she put it on a tray and carried it into the living-room. At the exact moment she entered, she saw her husband coming in through the French windows from the garden.

'Here's his supper,' she said, putting it on the table and turning towards the sofa. 'Where is he?'

Her husband closed the garden door behind him and walked across the room to get himself a cigarette.

'Edward, where is he?'

'Who?'

'You know who.'

'Ah, yes. Yes, that's right. Well – I'll tell you.' He was bending forward to light the cigarette, and his hands were cupped around the enormous patent lighter. He glanced up and saw Louisa looking at him – at his shoes and the bottoms of his khaki slacks, which were damp from walking in long grass.

'I just went out to see how the bonfire was going,' he said.

Her eyes travelled slowly upward and rested on his hands.

'It's still burning fine,' he went on. 'I think it'll keep going all night.'

But the way she was staring made him uncomfortable.

'What is it?' he said, lowering the lighter. Then he looked down and noticed for the first time the long thin scratch that ran diagonally clear across the back of one hand, from the knuckle to the wrist.

'*Edward!*'

'Yes,' he said, 'I know. Those brambles are terrible. They tear you to pieces. Now, just a minute, Louisa. What's the matter?'

'*Edward!*'

'Oh, for God's sake, woman, sit down and keep calm. There's nothing to get worked up about. Louisa! Louisa, *sit down*!'

By the Scruff of the Soul

Dorothy Salisbury Davis

Most people, when they go down from the Ragapoo Hills, never come back; or if they do, for a funeral maybe – weddings don't count for so much around here any more either – you can see them fidgeting to get away again. As for me, I'm one of those rare birds they didn't have any trouble keeping down on the farm after he'd seen Paree.

It's forty years since I've seen the bright lights, but I don't figure I've missed an awful lot. Hell, I can remember the Ku Klux Klan marching right out in the open. My first case had to do with a revenue agent – I won it, too, and we haven't had a government man up here since. And take the League of Nations - I felt awful sorry in those days for Mr. Wilson though I didn't hold with his ideas.

Maybe things have changed, but sometimes I wonder just how much. This bomb I don't understand, fallout and all, but I've seen what a plague of locusts can do to a wheat field and I don't think man's ever going to beat nature when it comes to pure, ornery destruction. I could be wrong about that. Our new parson says I am and he's a mighty knowing man. Too knowing, maybe. I figure that's why the Synod shipped him up to us in Webbtown.

As I said, I don't figure I'm missing much. There's a

couple of television sets in town and sometimes of an evening I'll sit for an hour or so in front of whichever one of them's working best. One of them gets the shimmies every time the wind blows and the other don't bring in anything except by way of Canada. Same shows but different commercials. That kind of tickles me, all them companies advertising stuff you couldn't buy if you wanted to instead of stuff you wouldn't want if you could buy it.

But, as you've probably guessed by now, I'd rather talk than most anything, and since you asked about The Red Lantern, I'll tell you about the McCracken sisters who used to run it – and poor Old Matt Sawyer.

I'm a lawyer, by the way. I don't get much practice up here. I'm also Justice of the Peace. I don't get much practice out of that either, but between the two I make a living. For pleasure I fish for trout and play the violin, and at this point in my life I think I can say from experience that practice ain't everything.

I did the fiddling at Clara McCracken's christening party, I remember, just after coming home from the first World War. Maudie was about my age then, so's that'd make a difference of maybe twenty years between the sisters, and neither chit nor chizzler in between, and after them, the whole family suddenly dies out. That's how it happens up here in the hills: one generation and there'll be aunts and uncles galore, and the next, you got two maiden ladies and a bobtailed cat.

The Red Lantern Inn's boarded up now, as you saw, but it was in the McCracken family since just after the American Revolution. It was burned down once – in a reprisal raid during the War of 1812, and two of the McCrackens were taken hostage. Did you know Washington, D.C. was also burned in reprisal? It was. At least that's how they tell it over in Canada – for the way our boys tore up the town they call Toronto now. You know, history's like a story in a way: it depends on who's telling it.

Anyways, Maudie ran the inn after the old folks died, and she raised Clara the best she could, but Clara was a wild one

from the start. We used to call her a changeling: one minute she'd be sitting at the stove and the next she'd be off somewhere in the hills. She wasn't a pretty girl — the jutting McCracken jaw spoiled that – but there were times she was mighty feminine, and many a lad got thorny feet chasing after the will-o'-the-wisp.

As Clara was coming to age, Maudie used to keep a birch stick behind the bar, and now and then I dare say she'd use it, though I never saw it happen but once myself. But that birch stick and Old Faithful, her father's shotgun, stood in the corner side by side, and I guess we made some pretty rude jokes about them in those days. Anyways, Maudie swore to tame the girl and marry her to what she called a 'settled' man.

By the time Clara was of a marrying age, The Red Lantern was getting pretty well rundown. And so was Maudie. She wasn't an easy woman by any calculation. She had a tongue you'd think was sharpened on the grindstone and a store of sayings that'd shock you if you didn't know your Bible. The inn was peeling paint and wanting shutters to the northeast, which is where they're needed most. But inside, Maudie kept the rooms as clean and plain as a glass egg. And most times they were about as empty.

It was the taproom kept the sisters going. They drew the best beer this side of Cornwall, England. If they knew you, that is. If they didn't know you, they served you a labelled bottle, stuff you'd recognise by the signboard pictures. About once a month, Maudie had to buy a case of that – which gives you an idea how many strangers stopped over in Webbtown. We had more stores then and the flour mill was working, so the farmers'd come in regular. But none of them were strangers. You see, even to go to Ragapoo City, the county seat, you've got to go twenty miles around – unless you're like Clara was, skipping over the mountain.

Matt Sawyer came through every week or two in those days and he always stopped at Prouty's Hardware Store. Matt was a paint salesman. I suppose he sold Prouty a few gallons over the years. Who bought it from Prouty, I couldn't

say. But Prouty liked Matt. I did myself when I got to know him. Or maybe I just felt sorry for him.

It was during the spring storms, this particular day. The rain was popping blisters on Main Street. Most everyone in Webbtown seems to have been inside looking out that day. Half the town claimed afterwards to have seen Matt come out of Prouty's raising his black umbrella over Maudie's head and walking her home. I saw them myself, Maudie pulling herself in and Matt half in and half out. I know for a fact she'd never been under an umbrella before in her life.

Prouty told me afterwards he'd forgot she was in the store when he was talking to Matt: Maudie took a mighty long time making up her mind before buying anything. Like he always did, Prouty was joshing Matt about having enough money to find himself a nice little woman and give up the road. Maudie wasn't backward. She took a direct line: she just up and asked Matt since he had an umbrella, would he mind walking her home. Matt was more of a gentleman than anybody I ever knew. He said it would be a pleasure. Maybe it was, but that was the beginning of the doggonedest three-cornered courtship in the county history. And it's all documented today in the county court records over in Ragapoo City. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I've got my office in my hat, you might say, and I hang that in rooms over Kincaid's Drug Store. I was standing at the window when Matt and Maudie came out of Prouty's. I remember I was trying to tune my violin. You can't keep a fiddle in tune weather like that. I played kind of ex tempore for a while, drifting from one thing to another – sad songs mostly, like 'The Vacant Chair'. *We shall meet but we shall miss him . . . there will be one vacant chair.* I got myself so depressed I hung up the fiddle and went down to The Red Lantern for a glass of Maudie's Own.

Well, sure enough, there was Matt Sawyer sitting at the bar advising Maudie on the costs of paint and trimming and how to estimate the amount of paint a place the size of The Red Lantern would need. Now I knew Maudie couldn't afford whitewash much less the high-class line of stuff Matt

represented. But there she was, leaning on the bar, hand in chin and her rump in the air like a swaybacked mule. She drew me a beer and put a head on Matt's. Then she went back to listening to him.

I don't know how long it took me to notice what was really going on: I'm slow sometimes, but all this while Clara was standing on a stool polishing a row of fancy mugs Maudie kept on a ledge over the back mirror. The whole row of lights was on under the ledge and shining double in the mirror. Hell, Matt Sawyer wasn't actually making sense at all, what he was saying in facts and figures. He was just making up words to keep old Maudie distracted – he thought – and all the while him gazing up at Clara every chance he'd get. I might as well be honest with you: it was looking at Clara myself I realised what was going on in that room. The way she was reaching up and down in front of that mirror and with a silk petticoat kind of dress on, you'd have sworn she was stark naked.

Well, sir, just think about that. Matt, being a gentleman, was blushing and yearning – I guess you'd call it that – but making conversation all the time; and Maudie was conniving a match for Clara with a man who could talk a thousand dollars' worth of paint without jumping his Adam's apple. I'll say this about Maudie: for an unmarried lady she was mighty knowing in the fundamentals. Clara was the only innocent one in the room, I got to thinking.

All of a sudden Maudie says to me, 'Hank, how's your fiddle these days?'

'It's got four strings,' I said.

'You bring it up after supper, hear?' It was Maudie's way never to ask for something. She told you what you were going to do and most often you did it. Clara looked round at me from that perch of hers and clapped her hands.

Maudie laid a bony finger on Matt's hand. 'You'll stay to supper with us, Mr. Sawyer. Our Clara's got a leg of lamb in the oven like you never tasted. It's home hung and roasted with garden herbs.'

Now I knew for a fact the only thing Clara ever put in the

oven was maybe a pair of shoes to warm them of a winter's morning. And it was just about then Clara caught on, too, to what Maudie was manoeuvring Her eyes got a real wild look in them, like a fox cornered in a chicken coop. She bounded down and across that room . . .

I've often wondered what would've happened if I hadn't spoken then. It gives me a cold chill thinking about it – words said with the best intentions in the world. I called out just as she got to the door: 'Clara, I'll be bringing up my fiddle.'

I don't suppose there ever was a party in Webbtown like Maudie put on that night. Word got around. Even the young folks came that mightn't have if it was spooning weather. Maudie wore her best dress – the one she was saving, we used to say, for Clara's wedding and her own funeral. It was black, but on happier occasions she'd liven it up with a piece of red silk at the collar. I remember Prouty saying once that patch of red turned Maudie from a Holstein into a Guernsey. Prouty, by the way, runs the undertaking parlour as well as the hardware store.

I near split my fingers that night fiddling. Maudie tapped a special keg. Everybody paid for his first glass, but after that she put the cash box away and you might say she drew by heart.

Matt was having a grand time just watching mostly. Matt was one of those creamy-looking fellows, with checks as pink as winter apples. He must've been fifty but there wasn't a line or wrinkle in his face. And I never seen him without his collar and tie on. Like I said, a gentleman.

Clara took to music like a bird to wing. I always got the feeling no matter who was taking her in or out she was actually dancing alone; she could do two steps to everybody else's one. Matt never took his eyes off her, and once he danced with her when Maudie pushed him into it.

That was trouble's start – although we didn't know it at the time. Prouty said afterwards he did, but Prouty's a man who knows everything after the fact. That's being an undertaker, I dare say. Anyway, Matt was hesitating after Clara – and it was like that, her sort of skipping ahead and leading

him on, when all of a sudden, young Reuben White leaped in between them and danced with Clara the way she needed to be danced with.

Now Reuben didn't have much to recommend him, especially to Maudie. He did an odd job now and then – in fact, he hauled water for Maudie from the well she had up by the brewhouse back of Maple Tree Ridge. And this you ought to know about Maudie if you don't by now – anybody she could boss around, she had no use for.

Anyways, watching that boy dance with Clara that night should've set us all to thinking, him whirling her and tossing her up in the air, them spinning round together like an August twister. My fiddle's got a devil in it at a time like that. Faster and faster I was bowing, till plunk I broke a string, but I went right on playing.

Matt fell back with the other folks, clapping and cheering, but Maudie I could see going after her stick. I bowed even faster, seeing her. It was like a race we were all in together. Then all of a sudden, like something dying high up in the sky and falling mute, my E string broke and I wasn't playing any more. In the centre of the tavern floor Clara and Reuben just folded up together and slumped down into a heap.

Everybody was real still for about a half a minute. Then Maudie came charging out, slashing the air with that switch of hers. She grabbed Clara by the hair – I swear she lifted the girl to her feet that way and flung her towards the bar. Then she turned on Reuben. That boy slithered clear across the barroom floor, every time just getting out of the way of a slash from Maudie's stick. People by then were cheering in a kind of rhythm – for him or Maudie, you couldn't just be sure, and maybe they weren't for either. 'Now!' they'd shout at every whistle of the switch. 'Now! Now! *Now!*'

Prouty opened the door just when Reuben got there, and when the boy was out Prouty closed it against Maudie. I thought for a minute she was going to turn on him. But she just stood looking and then burst out laughing. Everybody started clouting her on the back and having a hell of a time.

I was at the bar by then and so was Matt. I heard him,

leaning close to Clara, say, 'Miss Clara, I never saw anything as beautiful as you in all my life.'

Clara's eyes snapped back at him but she didn't say a word.

Well, it was noon the next day before Matt pulled out of town, and sure enough, he forgot his umbrella and came back that night. I went up to The Red Lantern for my five o'clock usual, and him and Maudie were tête à tête, as they say, across the bar. Maudie was spouting the praises of her Clara – how she could sew and cook and bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy. The only attention she paid me was as a collaborating witness.

I'll say this for Clara: when she did appear, she looked almost civilised, her hair in a ribbon, and her wearing a new striped skirt and a grandmother blouse clear up to her chin. That night, by glory, she went to the movie with Matt. We had movies every night except Sundays in those days. A year or so ago, they closed up the Bellevue altogether. Why did she go with him? My guess is she wanted to get away from Maudie, or maybe for Reuben to see her dressed up that way.

The next time I saw all of them together was Decoration Day. Matt was back in town, arranging his route so's he'd have to stop over the holiday in Webbtown. One of them carnival outfits had set up on the grounds back of the schoolhouse. Like I said before, we don't have any population to speak of in Webbtown, but we're central for the whole valley, and in the old days travelling entertainers could do all right if they didn't come too often.

There was all sorts of raffle booths – Indian blankets and kewpie dolls, a shooting gallery and one of those things where you throw baseballs at wooden bottles and get a cane if you knock 'em off. And there was an apparatus for testing a man's muscle: you know, you hit the target on the stand with a sledgehammer and then a little ball runs up a track that looks like a big thermometer and registers your strength in pounds.

I knew there was a trick to it no matter what the barker said about it being fair and square. Besides, nobody cares how strong a lawyer is as long as he can whisper in the

judge's ear. I could see old Maudie itching herself to have a swing at it, but she wasn't taking any chance or giving Matt the wrong impression about either of the McCracken girls.

Matt took off his coat, folded it, and gave it to Clara to hold. It was a warm day for that time of year and you could see where Matt had been sweating under the coat, but like I said, he was all gentleman. He even turned his back to the ladies before spitting on his hands. It took Matt three swings – twenty-five cents worth – but on the last one that little ball crawled the last few inches up the track and just sort of tinkled the bell at the top. The womenfolk clapped, and Matt put on his coat again, blushing and pleased with himself.

I suppose you've guessed that Reuben showed up then. He did, wearing a cotton shirt open halfway down to his belly.

'Now, my boy,' the barker says, 'show the ladies, show the world that you're a man! How many?'

Reuben sniggled a coin out of his watch pocket, and mighty cocky for him, he said, 'Keep the change.'

Well, you've guessed the next part, too. Reuben took one swing and you could hear that gong ring out clear across the valley. It brought a lot of people running and the carnival man was so pleased he took out a big cigar and gave it to Reuben. 'That, young fellow, wins you a fifty-cent Havana. But I'll send you the bill if you broke the machine, ha! ha!'

Reuben grinned and took the cigar, and strutting across to Clara, he made her a present of it. Now in Matt's book, you didn't give a lady a cigar, no, sir. Not saying a word, Matt brought his fist up with everything he had dead to centre under Reuben's chin. We were all of us plain stunned, but nobody more than Reuben. He lay on the ground with his eyes rolling round in his head like marbles.

You'd say that was the blow struck for romance, wouldn't you? Not if you knew our Clara. She plopped down beside Reuben like he was the dying gladiator, or maybe just something she'd come on helpless in the woods. It was Maudie who clucked and crowed over Matt. All of a sudden Clara leaped up – Reuben was coming round by then – and she

gave a whisk of that fancy skirt and took off for the hills, Maudie bawling after her like a hogcaller. And at that point, Reuben scrambled to his feet and galloped after Clara. It wasn't long till all you could see of where they'd gone was a little whiff of dust at the edge of the dogwood grove. I picked up the cigar and tried to smoke it afterwards. I'd have been better off on a mixture of oak leaf and poison ivy.

Everything changed for the worse at The Red Lantern after that. Clara found her tongue and sassed her sister, giving Maudie back word for word, like a common scold. One was getting mean and the other meaner. And short of chaining her, Maudie couldn't keep Clara at home any more, not when Clara wanted to go.

Matt kept calling at The Red Lantern regularly, and Maudie kept making excuses for Clara's not being there. The only times I'd go to the inn in those days was when I'd see Matt's car outside. The place would brighten up then, Maudie putting on a show for him. Otherwise, I'd have as soon sat in Prouty's cool room. It was about as cheerful. Even Maudie's beer was turning sour.

Matt was a patient man if anything, and I guess being smitten for the first time at his age he got it worse than most of us would: he'd sit all evening just waiting a sight of that girl. When we saw he wasn't going to get over it, Prouty and I undertook one day in late summer to give him some advice. What made us think we were authorities, I don't know. I've been living with my fiddle for years and I've already told you what Prouty'd been living with. Anyways, we advised Matt to get himself some hunting clothes – the season was coming round – and to put away that doggone collar and tie of his and get out in the open country where the game was.

Matt tried. Next time he came to Webbtown, as soon as he put in at The Red Lantern, he changed into a plaid wool shirt, brand-new khaki britches, and boots laced up to his knees, and with Prouty and me cheering him on, he headed for the hills. But like Cox's army, or whoever it was, he marched up the hill and marched down again.

But he kept at it. Every weekend he'd show up, change,

and set out, going farther and farther every time. One day, when the wind was coming sharp from the northeast, I heard him calling out up there: 'Clara . . . Clara . . .'

I'll tell you, that gave me a cold chill, and I wished to the Almighty that Prouty and I had minded our own business. Maudie would stand at the tavern door and watch him off, and I wondered how long it was going to take for her to go with him. By then, I'd lost whatever feeling I ever had for Maudie and I didn't have much left for Clara either. But what made me plain sick one day was Maudie confiding in me that she was thinking of locking Clara in her room and giving Matt the key. I said something mighty close to obscene such as I'd never said to a woman before in my life and walked out of the tavern.

It was one of those October days, you know, when the clouds keep building up like suds and then just seem to wash away. You could hear the school bell echo, and way off the hawking of the wild geese, and you'd know the only sound of birds till spring would be the lonesome cawing of the crows. I was working on a couple of things I had coming up in Quarter Sessions Court when Prouty pounded up my stairs. Prouty's a pretty dignified man who seldom runs.

'Hank,' he said, 'I just seen Matt Sawyer going up the hill. He's carrying old man McCracken's shotgun.'

I laughed kind of, seeing the picture in my mind. 'What do you think he aims to do with it?'

'If he was to fire it, Hank, he'd be likely to blow himself to eternity.'

'Maybe the poor buzzard'd be as well off,' I said.

'And something else, Hank – Maudie just closed up the tavern. She's stalking him into the hills.'

'That's something else,' I said, and reached for my pipe.

'What are we going to do?' Prouty fumbled through his pockets for some matches for me. He couldn't keep his hands still.

'Nothing,' I said. 'The less people in them hills right now the better.'

Prouty came to see it my way, but neither one of us could

do much work that afternoon. I'd go to the window every few minutes and see Prouty standing in the doorway. He'd look down towards The Red Lantern and shake his head, and I'd know Maudie hadn't come back yet.

Funny, how things go on just the same in a town at a time like that. Tom Kincaid, the druggist, came out and swept the sidewalk clean, passed the time of day with Prouty, and went inside again. The kids were coming home from school. Pretty soon they were all indoors doing their homework before chore time. Doc Sissler stopped at Kincaid's - he liked to supervise the making up of his prescriptions. It was Miss Dorman, the schoolteacher, who gave the first alarm. She always did her next day's lessons before going home, so it was maybe an hour after school let out. I heard her scream and ran to the window.

There was Matt coming down the street on Prouty's side, trailing the gun behind him. You could see he was saying something to himself or just out loud. I opened my window and shouted down to him. He came on then across the street. His step on the stair was like the drum in a death march. When he got to my doorway he just stood there saying, 'I killed her, Hank. I killed her dead.'

I got him into a chair and splashed some whiskey out for him. He dropped the gun on the floor beside him and let it lie there, stepping over it. By then Prouty had come upstairs, and by the time we got the whiskey inside Matt, Luke Weber, the constable, was there.

'He says he killed somebody,' I told Weber. 'I don't know who.'

Matt rolled his eyes towards me like I'd betrayed him just saying what he told me. His face was hanging limp and white as a strung goose. 'I know Matt Sawyer,' I added then, 'and if there was any killing, I'd swear before Jehovah it must've been an accident.'

That put a little life back in him. 'It was,' he said, 'it was truly.' And bit by piece we got the story out of him.

'I got to say in fairness to myself, taking the gun up there wasn't my own idea,' he started. 'Look at me, duded up like

this – I had no business from the start pretending I was something I wasn't.'

'That was me and Hank's fault,' Prouty said, mostly to the constable, 'advising him on how to court Miss Clara.'

He didn't have to explain that to Weber. Everybody in town knew it.

'I'm not blaming either one of you,' Matt said. 'It should've been enough for me, chasing an echo every time I thought I'd found her. And both of them once sitting up in a tree laughing at me fit to bust and pelting me with acorns . . .'

We knew he was talking about Reuben and Clara. It was pathetic listening to a man tell that kind of story on himself, and I couldn't help but think what kind of an impression it was going to make on a jury. I had to be realistic about it: there's some people up here would hang a man for making a fool of himself where they'd let him go for murder. I put the jury business straight out of my mind and kept hoping it was clear-cut accident. He hadn't said yet who was dead, but I thought I knew by then.

'Well, I found them for myself today,' he made himself go on, 'Clara and Reuben, that is. They were cosied in together in the sheepcote back of Maudie's well. It made me feel ashamed just being there and I was set to sneak away and give the whole thing up for good. But Maudie came up on me and took me by surprise. She held me there – by the scruff of the soul, you might say – and made me listen with her to them giggling and carrying on. I was plain sick with jealousy, I'll admit that.

'Then Maudie gave a shout: "Come out, you two! Or else we'll blow you out!" Something like that.

'It was a minute or two: nothing happened. Then we saw Reuben going full speed the other way, off towards the woods.

' "Shoot, Matt, now!" That's what Maudie shouted at me. "You got him clear to sight." But just then Clara sauntered out of the shelter towards us – just as innocent and sweet, like the first time I ever laid eyes on her.'

I'm going to tell you, Prouty and me looked at each other when he said that.

The constable interrupted him and asked his question straight: 'Did she have her clothes on?'

'All but her shoes. She was barefoot and I don't consider that unbecoming in a country girl.'

'Go on,' Weber told him.

Matt took a long drag of air and then plunged ahead. 'Maudie kept hollering at the boy – insults, I guess I know I'd have been insulted. Then he stopped running and turned around and started coming back. I forget what it was she said to me then – something about my manhood. But she kept saying, "Shoot, Matt! Shoot, shoot!" I was getting desperate, her hounding me that way. I slammed the gun down between us, butt-end on the ground. The muzzle of it, I guess, was looking her way. And it went off.

'It was like the ground exploding underneath us. Hell smoke and brimstone – that's what went through my mind. I don't know whether it was in my imagination – my ears weren't hearing proper after all that noise – but like ringing in my head I could hear Clara laughing, just laughing like hysterics . . . And then when I could see, there was Maudie lying on the ground. I couldn't even find her face for all that was left of her head.'

We stood all of us for a while after that. Listening to the tick of my alarm clock on the shelf over the washstand, I was. Weber picked up the gun then and took it over to the window where he examined the breech.

Then he said, 'What did you think you were going to do with this when you took it from the tavern?'

Matt shook his head. 'I don't know. When Maudie gave it to me, I thought it looked pretty good on me in the mirror.'

I couldn't wait to hear the prosecutor try that one on the jury.

Weber said, 'We better get on up there before dark and you show us how it happened.'

We stopped by at Prouty's on the way and picked up his wicker basket. There wasn't any way of driving beyond the

dogwood grove. People were following us by then. Weber sent them back to town and deputised two or three among them to be sure they kept the peace.

We hadn't got very far beyond the grove, the four of us, just walking, climbing up, and saying nothing. Hearing the crows a-screaming not far ahead gave me a crawling stomach. They're scavengers, you know.

Well, sir, down the hill fair-to-flying, her hair streaming out in the wind, came Clara to meet us. She never hesitated, throwing herself straight at Matt. It was instinct made him put his arms out to catch her and she dived into them and flung her own arms around his neck, hugging him and holding him, and saying things like, 'Darling Matt . . . wonderful Matt. I love Matt.' I heard her say that.

You'd have thought to see Matt, he'd turned to stone. Weber was staring at them, a mighty puzzled look on his face.

'Miss Clara,' I said, 'behave yourself.'

She looked at me – I swear she was smiling – and said, 'You hush, old Hank, or we won't let you play the fiddle at our wedding.'

It was Prouty said, hoisting his basket up on his shoulders, 'Let's take one thing at a time.'

That got us started on our way again, Clara skipping along at Matt's side, trying to catch his hand. Luke Weber didn't say a word.

I'm not going into the details now of what we saw. It was just about like Matt had told it in my office. I was sick a couple of times. I don't think Matt had anything left in him to be sick with. When it came to telling what had happened first, Clara was called on to corroborate. And Weber asked her, 'Where's Reuben now, Miss Clara?'

'Gone,' she said, 'and I don't care.'

'Didn't care much about your sister either, did you?' Weber drawled, and I began to see how really bad a spot old Matt was in. There was no accounting Clara's change of heart about him – except he'd killed her sister. The corroborating witness we needed right then was Reuben White.

Prouty got Weber's go-ahead on the job he had to do. I couldn't help him though I tried. What I did when he asked it, was go up to Maudie's well to draw him a pail of water so's he could wash his hands when he was done. Well, sir, I'd have been better off helping him direct. I couldn't get the bucket down to where it would draw the water.

After trying a couple of times, I called out to Weber asking if he had a flashlight. He brought it and threw the beam of light down into the well. Just above the water level a pair of size-twelve shoes were staring up at us – the soles of them like Orphan Annie's eyes.

There wasn't any doubt in our minds that what was holding them up like that was Reuben White, headfirst in the well.

The constable called Clara to him and took a short-cut in his questioning.

'How'd it happen, girl?'

'I guess I pushed him,' Clara said, almost casual.

'It took a heap of pushing,' Weber said.

'No, it didn't. I just got him to look down and then I tumbled him in.'

'Why?'

'Matt,' she said, and smiled like a Christmas cherub.

Matt groaned, and I did too inside.

'Leastways, it come to that,' Clara explained. Then in that quick-changing way of hers, she turned deep serious. 'Mr. Weber, you wouldn't believe me if I told you what Reuben White wanted me to do with him – in the sheepcote this afternoon.'

'I might,' Luke Weber said.

I looked at Prouty and drew my first half-easy breath. I could see he felt the same. We're both old-fashioned enough to take warmly to a girl's defending her virtue.

But Weber didn't bat an eye, 'And where does Matt here come in on it?' he said.

'I figure he won't ever want me to do a thing like that,' Clara said, and gazed up at old stoneface with a look of pure adoration.

'Where was Matt when you . . . tumbled Reuben in?' Weber asked, and I could tell he was well on his way to believing her.

'He'd gone down the hill to tell you what'd happened to Sister Maudie.'

'And when was it Reuben made this – this proposal to you?' Weber said. I could see he was getting at the question of premeditation. Luke Weber's a pretty fair policeman.

'It was Matt proposed to me,' Clara said. 'That's why I'm going to marry him. Reuben just wanted . . .'

Weber interrupted. 'Why, if he wasn't molesting you just then, and if you'd decided to marry Matt Sawyer, why did you have to kill him? You must've known a well's no place for diving.'

Clara shrugged her pretty shoulders. 'By then I was feeling kind of sorry for him. He'd have been mighty lonesome after I went to live with Matt.'

Well, there isn't much more to tell. We sort of disengaged Matt, you might say. His story of how Maudie died stood up with the coroner, Prouty and I vouching for the kind of man he was. I haven't seen him since.

Clara – she'll be getting out soon, coming home to the hills, and maybe opening up The Red Lantern again. I defended her at the trial, pleading temporary insanity. Nobody was willing to say she was insane exactly. We don't like saying such things about one another up here. But the jury agreed she was a temporary sort of woman. Twenty years to life, she got, with time off for good behaviour.

You come around some time next spring. I'll introduce you.

Murder on St. Valentine's Day

Mignon G. Eberhart

I looked at the lacy object on my desk. '*What is this?*'

The young assistant cashier replied, 'It's a handkerchief. Possibly intended for the Valentine trade,' he hazarded thoughtfully. 'It's shaped like a heart.'

'I can see that!'

The handkerchief was undoubtedly heart-shaped and outlined with lace. Written on it in bright red were words and numerals. I touched the writing cautiously.

The assistant cashier said, 'It's not blood. It's lipstick.'

'I'm not so old I don't know lipstick when I see it,' I said stiffly.

'Yes, sir,' he said hurriedly. 'I mean, no, sir. Shall I tell them to cash it?'

I debated, seething with exasperation. For the thing was, incredibly, a cheque – and a cheque for $20,000. It was made out to one Ronald Murch and it was signed by Clarissa Hartridge, and Clarissa was one of my widows.

I hasten to say that I am, and, *Deo volente*, intend to remain, a bachelor. My name is James Wickwire. I am a senior vice president at the bank within whose sedate walls I have spent most of my life.

Clarissa was one of my widows only in the sense that her

estate, along with that of sundry other widows, was in my care.

One way and another, my widows have caused me considerable mental anguish, due in the main to their recurrent impulses to invest money in nonexistent oil wells, or to finance expeditions for the discovery of buried pirate treasure.

Up to that day, however, Clarissa had given me very little anxiety. She had kept well within her income, never made mistakes in subtraction, and was an extremely charming and pretty woman.

Consequently I had felt deeply grateful to her, and enjoyed dining with her, and a Miss Gray who shared her house, once or twice a year in the comfortable certainty that Clarissa would not ask me to balance her chequebook.

But this fantastic cheque was not merely an illusion shattered for me. It represented a large share of Clarissa's capital. The walls of the bank did not in fact rock, but I myself was shaken to the core. It was all too clear that something had happened to Clarissa and it was quite as clear what that something was. For my widows do not invariably remain widows. Sometimes they follow the same remarkable quality of impulse in choosing second husbands that they do in choosing investments.

'You say this Ronald Murch is out there now?' I asked the assistant cashier.

'Yes, sir. Young. Dark. Handsome. Presented the cheque as cool as you please. They brought it to me and I thought you'd better see it.'

'Of course.' I tapped the lacy edge of the handkerchief. Young, dark, and handsome! Clarissa was fifty if she was a day, and if I'd had my fingers on her plump little neck just then I really think I'd have twisted it. Instead I told my secretary to get Mrs. Hartridge on the telephone and then, perceiving the inquisitive gleam in the assistant cashier's pale blue eyes, I told him he could go and I'd see to it. He looked frustrated but went away.

Clarissa came on the phone and began at once to speak.

'James, I know why you're calling me,' she said airily. 'It's all right about the cheque. Cash it.'

I daresay I uttered a rather strangled sound. She said coolly, 'Have you got a cold, James?'

'No! What is the meaning . . .'

'I'm buying a formula for face cream.'

'*Face* – Clarissa, this is capital!'

She laughed lightly. 'Of course. I sold those Turnpike bonds.'

A choking sensation gripped me. She said, 'Oh. by the way, James. Can you return that cheque to me yourself? After you've cashed it, I mean. I don't want it to go through all that routine in the bank.'

'I can understand that!' I said acidly, but she had hung up.

When I had got control of myself I sent for Mr. Ronald Murch, who was still waiting. He was, indeed, dark, young, and handsome with a charm which raked my already lacerated nerves. And to my intense surprise a young lady with a great many golden curls and a sallow but heavily made-up face was hanging fondly on his arm. He introduced her.

'This is Miss April Moon.'

The young lady gave me a coquettish smile. 'Soon to be Mrs. Ronald Murch,' she said, and hugged his arm. 'We just got the licence.'

I was rather taken aback, since I had believed Clarissa destined for this dubious honour. Ronald Murch nodded at the heart-shaped handkerchief with its red writing. 'That does look rather silly, doesn't it?' he said.

'May I ask why it is written in this remarkable way?'

For an instant something puzzled flashed in his dark eyes. 'It was a whim of Clarissa's – I mean Mrs. Hartridge's. Just an impulse. She said it was suitable – lipstick, cosmetics. You see?'

'I can't say that I do,' I replied shortly.

Miss April Moon giggled. 'What does it matter how the old girl wanted to write it! It's legal. He gets the cash. She gets her formula. We get married.'

He drew a folded paper from an inner pocket and waved it at me. 'This is my new formula for face cream.'

I reached automatically for the paper but he returned it quickly to his pocket. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but it's a secret. I developed it myself. Believe me, it's an oil well.'

The words struck a sensitive nerve within me. I said icily, 'Does Mrs. Hartridge know of your approaching marriage?'

Miss Moon giggled. Mr. Murch assumed a businesslike air. 'That has nothing to do with you, Mr. Wickwire. If you have any doubt about this cheque kindly phone Mrs. Hartridge.'

So I was obliged to give directions to the effect that the absurd cheque was to be cashed. I also saw to it that the handkerchief itself was given to me. I placed it in my desk, and there was nothing further that I could do. Clarissa's instructions had been definite. I had already exceeded such small authority as I had. And Clarissa was in love. I know little of women, but I know when I'm licked.

Scarcely an hour later Clarissa telephoned me. 'James,' she said, 'he's dead! Ronald Murch. He's been shot. Right in my library. The police are here. They say he's been murdered. Please come!'

Clarissa's neat if unpretentious little house in the East Nineties was surrounded by policemen. Once inside the living-room, a police lieutenant fell upon me, questioned me exhaustively, then told me the circumstances of the murder.

'He's in there,' he said, nodding towards the tiny library which adjoined the living-room. The door was open; a cluster of men, some in uniform and some in plain-clothes, moved apart a little and I could see feet in highly polished black oxfords, at an odd angle on the rug. I could not see the rest of the body.

'Shot twice,' the lieutenant said. 'One got him through the heart. Mrs. Hartridge claims she heard the shots and thought it was a backfire from the street. After a time she came downstairs. Saw the guy in there, on the rug. Dead as a duck. Says

she phoned to the police right away. She was alone in the house.'

There were no servants in the household, but there was Miss Gray. I said, 'There's a Miss Gray who lived with Mrs. Hartridge –'

The lieutenant interrupted. 'She's gone shopping. She hasn't come back yet.'

'Did you find the murder gun?' I asked.

He nodded solemnly. 'That's the clincher. The gun belonged to Mrs. Hartridge. She says it was her husband's. Kept in a drawer of the table in the hall. Says she hasn't touched it knows nothing of it. There were no fingerprints. Probably she wore gloves.'

'Do you mean to say you suspect Mrs. Hartridge?'

'Who else?' he said, and rose as if to end the interview.

'Wait,' I said hurriedly. 'She had no motive, no reason –'

He gave me a cold and sceptical look. 'Listen. The guy had twenty thousand dollars in his pocket. Mrs. Hartridge admits that she gave him a cheque for the cash this morning. He had a key to this house in his pocket – a key to *this* house! She's an elderly widow with money. *And* he had another girl!' He eyed me triumphantly. 'There was a marriage licence in his pocket. What does it look like to you?'

It looked extremely serious, and I swallowed hard. 'What about the girl?'

'*She* didn't kill him. We traced her right away. She's at a beauty shop getting her hair curled and she's been there for an hour. I've sent a squad car for her.'

I could not comprehend Miss Moon's unbridled desire for still more curls, but I did comprehend the solid nature of her alibi. I said, 'Didn't Mrs. Hartridge tell you that she gave him the twenty thousand dollars for the purchase of a face cream formula?'

He laughed shortly. 'Oh, sure. She also admitted that she'd picked him up on the street! Didn't know anything about his background! Claims she didn't know he was going to be married! Probably that's not the first money she's given him.

By the way – you say you're her banker - we'll have to take a look through her cancelled cheques.'

And I'd be obliged to give them a cheque written in lipstick on a heart-shaped handkerchief. It seemed wiser to tell him of it at once, give him Murch's own explanation for it, and – if possible – thus minimise its disastrous effect. So, very carefully, I related the whole incident.

But the lieutenant was again triumphant. He smacked Clarissa's little Pembroke table with a fist which nearly broke it. 'That proves it! She was in love with the guy. You're a banker Did you ever get a cheque written like that before?'

I was obliged to confess I hadn't. 'It was an impulse,' I told him again. 'Lipstick cosmetic business – there's a connection. He said he had the face cream formula. It was in his pocket.'

He shook his head. 'He was lying to you. So was she because she knew you'd question that cheque. She wouldn't have wanted you to know her real reason for giving him that money. There's no formula. I went through his pockets myself.' He looked at the door as another policeman entered. 'What is it, Jake?'

It was Clarissa's friend and housemate, Miss Gray, returned from her shopping trip and horrified. They ushered her into the room and let me remain while they questioned her.

Naturally I listened with some interest. I knew Miss Gray, of course. She was a pleasant, rather plain young woman, although she looked handsomer than usual that morning for the light from the window fell directly upon her, revealing a dazzling complexion which seemed to make her dark eyes glow. She wore a neat grey suit and hat and clutched a black handbag.

She knew Mr. Murch, of course, she told the lieutenant; he had been a frequent guest of Clarissa's. She had gone shopping that morning. When asked if she had talked to anyone who could identify her, she grasped the intent of the question at once, with a flash of her dark eyes. But she said that she doubted it very much. She had made only one pur-

chase, stockings, and that was not a charge; she had paid cash. The box of stockings was on the table in the hall. Most of the morning she had simply strolled, window shopping.

The lieutenant pounced: 'Mrs. Hartridge was very fond of Ronald Murch, wasn't she? In fact, there was quite a romance going on there. Tell us the truth, Miss Gray.'

She rose angrily, her eyes blazing. 'That is outrageous! How dare you suggest such a thing!'

'Suppose I say that we have proof of it. Suppose I say that Mrs. Hartridge quarrelled with him over a girl and shot him?'

'Then I'd say you don't know what you're talking about! There was nothing like that between them – nothing! I'll swear to it in court if it comes to that.'

I interposed. 'A formula for face cream seems to have disappeared, Miss Gray. Do you mind if the lieutenant – er – searches your handbag?'

She lifted her eyebrows but gave her handbag to the lieutenant, who searched it rapidly, returned it to her, and said to me, 'I tell you there's no such formula, Mr. Wickwire. See here, you go and talk to Mrs. Hartridge. Get her to confess. It'll save trouble all the way around. Jake –' The policeman stepped forwards. 'Take him to her.'

I followed Jake's broad blue back up the little stairway to Clarissa's room. Another policeman, at a word from Jake, permitted me to enter it, and Clarissa came quickly to me. 'James! I believe they think I shot him!'

She was very pretty, with blue eyes, brown hair, and an astonishing complexion – so lovely, indeed, and so much more youthful than I remembered it, that my anxiety was sharpened.

It has always been said that love beautifies a woman, and certainly she looked glowing and younger than her years. On the other hand she certainly showed no signs of grief, or, indeed, of any sort of emotion. But, of course, murderers are said to be remarkably callous and cold-blooded.

I said gloomily, 'You'd better tell me all about it.'

She did. Her story differed in no detail from the one she

had told the police. When I asked her how young Murch had got a key to the front door, her blue eyes widened. 'I don't know! I didn't give him a key.'

I didn't, I couldn't believe her. 'Clarissa, when and where did you meet this young man?'

This, too, squared with the lieutenant's account. She said, with deplorable candour, it was in a taxi. 'That is, I was waiting for a taxi, and so was he. It was raining. A taxi came along and he offered it to me and, of course, I had to ask him to share it. We were going the same way. By the way, James, the formula for the face cream is mine. I paid for it, remember, and he had come to deliver it to me. So be sure you claim it for me.'

'Clarissa, are you telling the truth about this formula?'

'Certainly!' Her eyes snapped and she swished past me into a dressing-room and back again. She had a white jar with a black top, unlabelled, in her hand. She held it under my nose. 'This is the cream!'

I thrust it away with some force. After a moment I said, 'Clarissa, *why* did you write that cheque in lipstick?'

She sniffed the cream, absently. 'I'd never have thought of it myself. But then I realised it was an excellent idea.'

I caught her by the shoulders. '*Who* thought of it? *Who* suggested it? Young Murch?'

She told me.

I went downstairs at once, and as I got to the foot of the stairs the door opened and April Moon, sobbing wildly between two policemen, surged into the hall. The lieutenant and Miss Gray emerged from the library. And there was only one course for me to take.

A flat parcel, wrapped and tied, lay on the hall table. I snatched it up. Miss Gray hurled herself upon me like a tiger defending its young. Miss Moon screamed. I thrust the flat parcel at the lieutenant and dived behind him, evading Miss Gray's fingers. Miss Gray whirled around and made for the door where the two policemen seized her.

The formula for the face cream was neatly tucked into the folds of a pair of stockings.

I explained it, although, of course, it was perfectly clear. 'It's an excellent face cream. They've both been using it. Mrs. Hartridge and – ' I nodded at Miss Gray whose flawless complexion was now a blazing white, as her eyes were blazing black. 'Both of them wanted it. Miss April Moon only wanted the money.'

'I've never used it!' Miss Moon cried. 'It's no good. Ronald told me so. He said it was only a mixture of junk! He said it was a trick to get money from – ' She clapped both hands over her mouth.

I said to the lieutenant, 'The formula is, in fact, excellent Obviously Murch didn't know that – he hit on it by chance He meant merely to use the formula as an excuse to get money from Mrs. Hartridge. But both Miss Gray and Mrs Hartridge have developed beautiful complexions by using the cream.

'Mrs. Hartridge made a deal with Murch for its purchase. He was to deliver the formula to her this morning. Miss Gray knew that it was her last chance to get the formula for herself. So she determined upon a subtle but rather neat plan.'

'Huh?' The lieutenant was perplexed.

'It occurred to her to suggest a romance between Mrs. Hartridge and young Murch. It was a perfect set-up. Elderly widow with money; charming and poor young man. When Mrs. Hartridge was actually about to write a cheque to Murch for the formula, Miss Gray suggested that she write it in lipstick, on a heart-shaped handkerchief, as a good omen to the cosmetic business. Mrs. Hartridge – er – did so.

'Miss Gray knew the police would eventually see the cheque, which was sufficiently out-of-the-ordinary to attract attention. She denied the romance, indignantly, knowing that her defence of Mrs. Hartridge would incline you to exonerate Miss Gray – for if she had shot him, she reasoned, you would expect her to leap at the suggestion of Mrs. Hartridge's guilt.'

'But – ' the lieutenant said, 'how did she find out – '

I replied, 'I suggest that Miss Gray knew Murch was to come to the house. I suggest that she returned quietly, waited

for him, let him in, took him to the library – and cold-bloodedly shot him.

'Then she had to hurry. She put her own house key in his pocket – to add to the theory of a romance – snatched the formula and, probably, escaped by the kitchen door. She hid the formula in the parcel with the stockings merely, I think, because it struck her as a hiding place which was likely to be overlooked.

'So when that occurred to me, I snatched the stockings, because – well, you see if there had been nothing of importance in the parcel she would have done nothing. Instead of that –'

Something tingled on my cheek; I dabbed at it with my handkerchief which came away with streaks of red on it from the scratches left by Miss Gray's fingernails.

Not long ago I dined with Clarissa in her new and magnificent penthouse. As possibly everyone knows, she has made an enormous amount of money from her astute marketing of a face cream called, simply but suitably, Clarissa's Cream. Perhaps much of the success she has had in its merchandising is due to its trademark – which is a gay, red and white photograph of a heart-shaped handkerchief. It proved to be one of those extraordinary flukes of genius in advertising.

'So that,' I said, 'is why you wanted the cheque in good condition.'

She smiled at me. 'James,' she said, 'I have so much money. You must tell me all about investments.'

I looked at her elegant gown, her matchless pearls, the sapphires and diamonds on her hands. 'No, my dear,' I said. 'You tell me.'

Hey, Look at Me!

Jack Finney

About six months after Maxwell Kingery died, I saw his ghost walking along Miller Avenue in Mill Valley, California. It was 2.20 in the afternoon, a clear sunny day, and I saw him from a distance which I later paced off; it was less than fifteen feet. There is no possibility that I was mistaken about who – or what – I saw, and I'll tell you why I'm sure.

My name is Peter Marks, and I'm the book editor of a San Francisco newspaper. I live in Mill Valley a dozen miles from San Francisco, and I work at home most days; from about nine till around two or three in the afternoon. My wife is likely to need something from the store by then, so I generally walk downtown, nearly always stopping in at Myer's bakery, which has a lunch counter. Until he died, I often had coffee there with Max Kingery, and we'd sit at the counter for half an hour and talk.

He was a writer, so it was absolutely inevitable that I'd be introduced to him soon after he came to Mill Valley. A lot of writers live here, and whenever a new one arrives people love to introduce us and then stand back to see what will happen. Nothing much ever does, though once a man denounced me right out on the sidewalk in front of the Redhill liquor store. 'Peter Marks? The book critic?' he said, and when I nodded,

he said 'You, sir, are a puling idiot who ought to be writing "News of Our Pets" for *The Carmel Pine Cone* instead of criticising the work of your betters.' Then he turned, and – this is the word – stalked off, while I stood staring after him, smiling. I'd panned two of his books, he'd been waiting for Peter Marks ever since, and was admirably ready when his moment came.

But all Max Kingery said, stiffly, the day we were introduced, was 'How do you do,' then he stood there nodding rapidly a number of times, finally remembering to smile; and that's all I said to him. It was in the spring, downtown in front of the bank, I think, and Max was bareheaded, wearing a light-brown shabby-looking topcoat with the collar turned up. He was a black-haired, black-eyed man with heavy black-rimmed glasses, intense and quick-moving; it was hard for him to stand still there. He was young but already stooped, his hair thinning. I could see this was a man who took himself seriously, but his name rang no bell in my mind and we spoke politely and parted quickly; probably forever if we hadn't kept meeting in the bakery after that. But we both came in for coffee nearly every afternoon, and after we'd met and nodded half a dozen times we were almost forced to sit together at the counter and try to make some conversation.

So we slowly became friends; he didn't have many. After I knew him I looked up what he'd written, naturally, and found it was a first novel which I'd reviewed a year before. I'd said it showed promise, and that I thought it was possible he'd write a fine novel someday, but all in all it was the kind of review usually called *mixed*, and I felt awkward about it.

But I needn't have worried. I soon learned that what I or anyone else thought of his book was of no importance to Max; he knew that in time I and everyone else would have to say that Maxwell Kingery was a very great writer. Right now not many people, even here in town, knew he was a writer at all, but that was O.K. with Max; he wasn't ready for them to know. Someday not only every soul in Mill Valley but the inhabitants of remote villages in distant places would know he was one of the important writers of his time, and

possibly of all time. Max never said any of this, but you learned that he thought so and that it wasn't egotism. It was just something he knew, and maybe he was right. Who knows how many Shakespeares have died prematurely, how many young geniuses we've lost in stupid accidents, illnesses and wars?

Cora, my wife, met Max presently, and because he looked thin, hungry and forlorn – as he was – she had me ask him over for a meal, and pretty soon we were having him often. His wife had died about a year before we met him. (The more I learned about Max, the more it seemed to me that he was one of the occasional people who, beyond all dispute, are plagued by simple bad luck all their lives.) After his wife died, and his book had failed, he moved from the city to Mill Valley, and now he lived alone working on the novel which, with the others to follow, was going to make him famous. He lived in a mean, cheap little house he'd rented, walking downtown for meals. I never knew where he got whatever money he had; it wasn't much. So we had him over often so Cora could feed him, and, once he was sure he was welcome, he'd stop in of his own accord, if his work was going well. And nearly every day I saw him downtown, and we'd sit over coffee and talk.

It was seldom about writing. All he'd ever say about his own work when we met was it was going well or that it was not, because he knew I was interested. Some writers don't like to talk about what they're doing, and he was one; I never even knew what his book was about. We talked about politics, the possible futures of the world, and whatever else people on the way to becoming pretty good friends talk about. Occasionally he read a book I'd reviewed, and we'd discuss it and my review. He was always polite enough about what I did, but his real attitude showed through. Some writers are belligerent about critics, some are sullen and hostile, but Max was just contemptuous. I'm sure he believed that all writers outranked all critics – well or badly, they actually do the deed which we only sit and carp about. And sometimes Max would listen to an opinion of mine about someone's book,

then he'd shrug and say, 'Well, you're not a writer,' as though that severely limited my understanding. I'd say, 'No, I'm a critic,' which seemed a good answer to me, but Max would nod as though I'd agreed with him. He liked me, but to Max my work made me only a hanger-on, a camp follower, almost a parasite. That's why it was all right to accept free meals from me; I was one of the people who live off the work writers do, and I'm sure he thought it was only my duty, which I wouldn't deny, to help him get his book written. Reading it would be my reward.

But, of course, I never read Max's next book or the others that were to follow it; he died that summer, absolutely pointlessly. He caught flu or something; one of those nameless things everyone gets occasionally. But Max didn't always eat well or live sensibly, and it hung on and turned into pneumonia, though he didn't know that. He lay in that little house of his waiting to get well, and didn't. By the time he got himself to a doctor, and the doctor got him to a hospital and got some penicillin in him, it was too late and Max died in Marin General Hospital that night.

What made it even more shocking to Cora and me was the way we learned about it. We were out of town on vacation 600 miles away in Utah when it happened, and didn't know about it. (We've thought over and again, of course, that if only we'd been home when Max took sick we'd have taken him to our house and he'd never have got pneumonia, and I'm sure it's true; Max was just an unlucky man.) When we got home, not only did we learn that Max was dead but even his funeral, over ten days before, was already receding into the past.

So there was no way for Cora and me to make ourselves realise that Max was actually gone forever. You return from a vacation and slip back into an old routine so easily sometimes it hardly seems you'd left. It was like that now, and walking into the bakery again for coffee in the afternoons it seemed only a day or so since I'd last seen Max here, and whenever the door opened I'd find myself glancing up.

Except for a few people who remembered seeing me

around town with Max, and who spoke to me about him now, shaking their heads, it didn't seem to me that Max's death was even discussed. I'm sure people had talked about it to some extent at least, although not many had known him well or at all. But other events had replaced that one by some days. So to Cora and me Max's absence from the town didn't seem to have left any discernible gap in it.

Even visiting the cemetery didn't help. It's in San Rafael, not Mill Valley, and the grave was in a remote corner; we had to climb a steep hill to reach it. But it hardly seemed real; there was no marker, and we had to count in from the road to even locate it. Standing there in the sun with Cora, I felt a flash of resentment against his relatives, but then I knew I shouldn't. Max had a few scattered cousins or something in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The last time he'd known any of them at all well, they'd been children, and he hadn't corresponded with them since. Now they'd sent a minimum of money to California to pay expenses, more from family pride than for Max, I expect, and none of them had come themselves. You couldn't blame them, it was a long way and expensive, but it was sad; there'd been only five people at the funeral. Max had never been in or even seen this cemetery, and standing at the unmarked grave, the new grass already beginning, I couldn't get it through my head that it had anything much to do with him.

He just vanished from the town, that's all. His things – a half-finished manuscript, portable typewriter, some clothes and half a ream of unused yellow paper -- had been shipped to his relatives. And Max, with a dozen great books hidden in his brain, who had been going to be famous, was now just gone, hardly missed and barely remembered.

Time is the great healer, it makes you forget; sometimes it makes you forget literally and with great cruelty. I knew a man whose wife ran away, and he never saw her again. He missed her so much he thought he could never for a moment forget it. A year later, reading in his living-room at night, he became so absorbed in his book that when he heard a faint familiar noise in the kitchen he called out without looking

up from his book and asked his wife to bring him a cup of tea when she came back into the room. Only when there was no answer did he look up from his complete forgetfulness; then his loss swept over him worse than ever.

About six months after Max died, I finished my day's work and walked downtown. This was in January, and we'd just had nearly a month of rain, fog and wet chill. Then California did what it does several times every winter and for which I always forgive it anything. The rain stopped, the sun came out, the sky turned an unclouded blue, and the temperature went up into the high 70s. Everything was lush from the winter rains and there was no way to distinguish those three or four days from summer, and I walked into town in shirt sleeves. And when I started across Miller Avenue by the bus station heading for Myer's bakery across the street and saw Max Kingery over there walking towards the corner of Throckmorton just ahead, I wasn't surprised but just glad to see him. I think it was because this was like a continuation of the summer I'd known him, the interval following it omitted; and because I'd never really had proof that he died. So I walked on, crossing the street and watching Max, thin, dark and intense; he didn't see me. I was waiting till I got close enough to call to him and I reached the middle of the street and even took a step or two past it before I remembered that Max Kingery was dead. Then I just stood there, my mouth hanging open, as Max or what seemed to be Max walked on to the corner, turned, and moved on out of sight.

I went on to the bakery then and had my coffee; I had to have something. I don't know if I could have spoken, but I didn't have to; they always set a cup of coffee in front of me when I came in. My hand shook when I lifted the cup, and I spilled some, and if it had occurred to me I'd have gone to a bar instead and had several drinks.

If you ever have some such experience you'll learn that people resist believing you as they resist nothing else; you'll

resist it yourself. I got home and told Cora what had happened; we sat in the living-room and this time I did have a drink in my hand. She listened; there really wasn't much to say, I found, except that I'd seen Max Kingery walking along Miller Avenue. I couldn't blame Cora; my words sounded flat and foolish as I heard them. She nodded and said that several times she'd seen dark, preoccupied, thin young men downtown who reminded her a little of Max. It was onl natural; it was where we'd so often run into him.

Patiently I said, 'No, listen to me, Cora. It's one thing t see someone who reminds you of someone else; from a dis- tance, or from the back, or just as he disappears in a crowd But you cannot possibly mistake a stranger when you see hir close up and see his face in full daylight for someone you know well and saw often. With the possible exception of identical twins, there was no such resemblances between people. That was Max, Cora, Max Kingery and no one else in the world.'

Cora just sat there on the davenport continuing to look at me; she didn't know what to say. I understood, and felt half sorry for her, half irritated. Finally – she had to say *some- thing* – she said, 'Well . . . what was he wearing?'

I had to stop and think. Then I shrugged. 'Well, just some kind of pants; I didn't notice the shoes; a dark shirt of some kind, maybe plaid, I don't know. And one of those round straw hats.'

'Round straw hats?'

'Yeah, you know. You see people wearing them in the summer. I think they buy them at carnivals or somewhere. With a peak. Shaped like a baseball cap only they're made of some kind of shiny yellow straw. Usually the peak is stitched around the rim with a narrow strip of red cloth or braid. This one was, and it had a red button on top, and' – I remembered this suddenly, triumphantly – 'it had his initials on the front! Big red initials, *M.K.*, about three inches high, stitched into the straw just over the peak in red thread or braid or something.'

Cora was nodding decisively. 'That proves it.'

'Of course! It –'

'No, no,' she said irritably. 'It proves that it *wasn't* Max; it couldn't be!'

I don't know why we were so irritable; fear of the unnatural, I suppose. 'And just how does it prove that?'

'Oh, Pete! Can you *imagine* Max Kingery of all people wearing a hat like that? You've got to be' – she shrugged, hunting for the word – 'some kind of extrovert to wear silly hats. Of all people in the world who would *not* wear a straw baseball cap with a red button on the top and three-inch-high *initials* on the front . . . ' She stopped, looking at me anxiously, and after a moment I had to agree.

'Yeah,' I said slowly. 'He'd be the last guy in the world to wear one of those.' I gave in then; there wasn't anything else to do. 'It must have been someone else. I probably got the initials wrong; I saw what I thought they ought to be instead of what they were. It would *have* to be someone else, naturally, cap or no cap.' Then the memory of what I'd seen rose up in my mind again clear as a sharply detailed photograph, and I said slowly, 'But I just hope you see him sometime, that's all. Whoever he is.'

She saw him ten days later. There was a movie at the Sequoia we wanted to see, so we got our sitter, then drove downtown after supper; the weather was clear and dry but brisk, temperature in the middle or high thirties. When we got to the box office, the picture was still on with twenty minutes to go yet, so we took a little walk first.

Except for the theatre and a bar or two, downtown Mill Valley is locked up and deserted at night. But most of the display windows are left lighted, so we strolled along Throckmorton Avenue and began looking into them, beginning with Gomez Jewellery. We were out of sight of the theatre here, and as we moved slowly along from window to window there wasn't another human being in sight, not a car moving, and our own footsteps on the sidewalk – unusually loud – were the only sound. We were at The Men's Shop looking in at a display of cuff links, Cora urging me once more to start wearing shirts with French cuffs so I could wear links in my

sleeves, when I heard footsteps turn a corner and begin approaching us on Throckmorton, and I knew it was Max.

I used to say that I'd like to have some sort of psychical experience, that I'd like to see a ghost, but I was wrong. I think it must be one of the worst kinds of fear. I now believe it can drive men insane and whiten their hair, and that it has. It's a nasty fear, you're so helpless, and it began in me now, increasing steadily, and I wanted to spare Cora the worst of it.

She was still talking, pointing at a pair of cuff links made from old cable-car tokens. I knew she'd become aware of the footsteps in a moment and turn to see whoever was passing. I had to prepare her before she turned and saw Max full in the face without warning, and – not wanting to – I turned my head slowly. A permanent awning projects over the storefronts along here, and the light from the windows seemed to be confined under it, not reaching the outer edge of the walk beyond the awning. But there was a three-quarter moon just rising above the trees that surround the downtown area, and by that pale light I saw Max walking briskly along that outer edge of sidewalk beside the curb, only a dozen yards away now. He was bareheaded and I saw his face sharp and clear, and it was Max beyond all doubt. There was no way to say anything else to myself.

I slipped my hand under Cora's coat sleeve and began squeezing her upper arm, steadily harder and harder, till it must have approached pain – and she understood, becoming aware of the footsteps. I felt her body stiffen and I wished she wouldn't but knew she had to – she turned. Then we stood there as he walked steadily towards us in the moonlight. My scalp stirred, each hair of my head moved and tried to stand.

The skin all over my body chilled as the blood receded from it. Beside me Cora stood shivering, violently, and her teeth were chattering, the only time in my life I've ever heard the sound. I believe she would have fallen except for my grip on her arm.

Courage was useless, and I don't claim I had any, but it seemed to me that to save Cora from some unspeakable con-

sequence of fear beyond ability to bear it I had to speak and that I had to do it casually. I can't say why I thought that, but as Max approached – his regular steadily advancing steps the only sound left in the world now, his white face in the moonlight not ten feet away – I said, 'Hello, Max.'

At first I thought he wasn't going to answer or respond in any way. He walked on, eyes straight ahead, for at least two more steps, then his head turned very slowly as though the effort were enormous, and he looked at us as he passed with a terrible sadness lying motionless in his eyes. Then, just as slowly, he turned away again, eyes forward, and he was actually a pace or two beyond us when his voice – a dead monotone, the effort tremendous – said, 'Hello,' and it was the voice of despair, absolute and hopeless.

The street curves just ahead, he would disappear around its bend in a moment. and as I stared after him, in spite of the fear and sorrow for Max, I was astounded at what I saw now. There is a kind of jacket which rightly or wrongly I associate with a certain kind of slouching, thumbs-hooked-in-the-belt juvenile exhibitionist. They are made of some sort of shiny sateen-like cloth, always in two bright and violently contrasting colours – the sleeves yellow, the body a chemical green, for example – and usually a name of some sort is lettered across the back. Teenage gangs wear them, or used to.

Max wore one now. It was hard to tell colours in the moonlight, but I think it was orange with red sleeves, and stitched on the back in a great flowing script that nearly covered it was *Max K.* Then he was gone, around the corner, his fading footsteps continuing two, three, four or five times as they dwindled into silence.

I had to support Cora, and her feet stumbled as we walked to the car. In the car she began to cry, rocking back and forth, her hands over her face. She told me later that she'd cried from grief at feeling such fear of Max. But it helped her, and I drove us to lights and people then; to a crowded bar away from Mill Valley in Sausalito a few miles off. We sat and drank then, several brandies each, and talked and

wondered and asked each other the same questions but had no answers.

I think other people saw Max in Mill Valley during those days. One of the local cabdrivers who park by the bus station walked up to me one day; actually he strolled, hands in pockets, making a point of seeming very casual. He said, 'Say, that friend of yours, that young guy used to be around town that died?' There was caution in his voice, and he stood watching me closely as I answered. I nodded and said yeah to show that I understood who he meant. 'Well, did he have a brother or something?' the driver said, and I shook my head and said not that I knew of. He nodded but was unsatisfied, still watching my face and waiting for me to offer something more but I didn't. And I knew he'd seen Max. I'm sure others saw him and knew who it was, as Cora and I did; it isn't something you mention casually. And I suppose there were those who saw him and merely recognised him vaguely as someone they'd seen around town before.

I walked over to Max's old house a day or so after we'd seen him; by that time, of course, I knew why he'd come back. The real-estate office that had it listed for rental again would have let me have the key if I'd asked; they knew me. But I didn't know what I could tell them as a reason for going in. It was an old house, run down, too small for most people; not the kind that rents quickly or that anyone bothers guarding too diligently. I felt sure I could get in somewhere, and on the tiny back porch, shielded from view, I tried the kitchen window and it opened and I climbed in.

The few scraps of furniture that had come with the place were still there, in the silence: a wooden table and two chairs in the tiny kitchen which Max had hardly used; the iron single bed in the bedroom; the worn-out musty-smelling davenport and matching chair in the living-room and the rickety card table beside the front windows where Max had worked. What little I found, I found lying on the floor beside the table; two crumbled-up wads of the yellow copy paper Max had used.

I opened them up, but it's hard to describe what was

written on them. There were single words and what seemed to be parts of words and fragments of sentences and completely unreadable scribblings, all written in pencil. There was a word that might have been *forest* or *foreign*; the final letters degenerated into a scrawl as though the hand holding the pencil had begun to fall away from the paper before it could finish. There was an unfinished sentence beginning, *She ran to*, and the stroke crossing the t wavered on partway across and then down the sheet till it ran off the bottom. There is no use describing in detail what is on those two crumpled sheets; there's no sense to be made of it, though I've often tried. It looks, I imagine, like the scrawlings of a man weak from fever and in delirium: as though every squiggle and wobbly line were made with almost-impossible effort. And I'm sure they were. It is true that they might be notes jotted down months earlier when Max was alive and which no one bothered to pick up and remove; but I know they aren't. They're the reason Max came back. They're what he tried to do, and failed.

I don't know what ghosts are or why, in rare instances, they appear. Maybe all human beings have the power, if they have the will, to reappear as Max and a few others have done occasionally down through the centuries. But I believe that to do so takes some kind of terrible and unimaginable expenditure of psychic energy. I think it takes such a fearful effort of will that it is beyond our imagining; and that only very rarely is such an incredible effort made.

I think a Shakespeare killed before *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* were written might have put forth such effort and returned. And I know that Max Kingery did. But there was almost nothing left over to do what he came back for. Those meaningless fragments were the utmost he could accomplish. His appearances were at the cost of tremendous effort, and I think that to even turn his head and look at us in addition, as he did the night we saw him, and then to actually pronounce an audible word besides, were efforts no one alive can understand.

It was beyond him, he could not return and then write the

books that were to have made the name of Max Kingery what he'd been certain it was destined to be. And so he had to give up; we never saw Max again, though we saw two more places he'd been.

Cora and I were driving to San Rafael over the country road. You can get there on a six-lane highway now, 101, that slices straight through the hills, but this was once part of the only road between the two towns and it winds a lot around and between the Marin County hills, under the trees. It's a pleasant narrow little two-lane road, and we like to take it once in a while; I believe it's still the shortest route to San Rafael, winding though it is. This was the end of January or early in February, I don't remember. It was early in the week, I'd taken the day off, and Cora wanted something at Penney's so we drove over.

Twenty or thirty feet up on the side of a hill about a mile outside Mill Valley there's an outcropping of smooth-faced rock facing the road, and Cora glanced at it, exclaimed and pointed, and I jammed on the brakes and looked up where she was pointing. There on the rock facing the public road, painted in great four-foot letters, was *Max Ki*, the lines crude and uneven, driblets of paint running down past the bottoms of letters, the final stroke continuing on down the face of the rock until the paint or oil on the brush or stick had run thin and faded away. We knew Max had painted it – his name or as much of it as he could manage – and staring up at it now, I understood the loud jacket with *Max K* on its back, and the carnival straw hat with the big red initials.

For who *are* the people who paint their names or initials in public places and on the rocks that face our highways? Driving from San Francisco to Reno through the Donner Pass you see them by the hundreds, some painted so high that the rocks must have been scaled, dangerously, to do it. I used to puzzle over them; to paint your name or initials up there in the mountains wasn't impulse. It took planning. You'd have to drive over a hundred miles with a can of paint on the floor of the car. Who would do that? And who would wear the caps stitched with initials and the jackets with

names on their backs? It was plain to me now; they are the people, of course, who feel that they have no identity. And who are fighting for one.

They are unknown, nearly invisible, so they feel; and their names or initials held up to the uninterested eyes of the world are silent shouts of, *'Hey, look at me!'* Children shout it incessantly while acquiring their identities, and if they never acquire one maybe they never stop shouting. Because the thing they do must always leave them with a feeling of emptiness. Initials on their caps, names on their jackets, or even painted high on a cliff visible for miles, they must always feel their failure to leave a real mark, and so they repeat it again and again. And Max who had to be someone, who *had* to be, did as they did, finally, from desperation. To have never been anyone and to be forgotten completely was not to be borne. At whatever cost he too had to try to leave his name behind him, even if he were reduced to painting it on a rock.

I visited the cemetery once more that spring; plodding up the hill, eyes on the ground. Nearing the crest I looked up, then stopped in my tracks, astounded. There at the head of Max's grave stood an enormous grey stone, the biggest by far of any in sight, and it was made not of concrete or pressed stone but of the finest granite. It would last a thousand years, and cut deeply into its face in big letters was MAXWELL KINGERY, AUTHOR.

Down in his shop outside the gates I talked to the middle-aged stonecutter in the little office at the front of the building; he was wearing a work apron and cap. He said, 'Yes, certainly I remember the man who ordered it; black hair and eyes, heavy glasses. He told me what it should say, and I wrote it down. Your name's Peter Marks, isn't it?' I said it was, and he nodded as though he knew it. 'Yes, he told me you'd be here, and I knew you would. Hard for him to talk; had some speech impediment, but I understood him.' He turned to a littered desk, leafed through a little stack of papers, then found the one he wanted, and slid it across the counter to me. 'He said you'd be in and pay for it; here's

the bill. It's expensive but worth it, a fine stone and the only one hereI know of for an author.'

For several moments I just stood there staring at the paper in my hand. Then I did the only thing left to do, and got out one of the cheques I carry in my wallet. Waiting while I wrote, the stonecutter said politely, 'And what do you do, Mr. Marks; you an author, too?'

'No,' I said, signing the cheque, then I looked up smiling. 'I'm just a critic.'

Muldoon and the Numbers Game

Robert L. Fish

A few of those who believed in the powers of old Miss Gilhooley said she did it with E.S.P., but the majority claimed she had to be a witch, she having come originally from Salem, which she never denied. The ones who scoffed, of course, said it was either the percentages, or just plain luck. But the fact was, she could see things – in cloud formations, or in baseball cards, or in the throwing of bottle caps, among other things – that were truly amazing.

Muldoon was one of those who believed in old Miss Gilhooley implicitly. Once, shortly after his Kathleen had passed away three years before, old Miss Gilhooley, reading the foam left in his beer glass, told him to beware of a tall, dark woman, and it wasn't two days later that Mrs. Johnson, who did his laundry, tried to give him back a puce striped shirt as one of his own that Muldoon wouldn't have worn to a Chinese water torture. And not long after, old Miss Gilhooley, reading the lumps on his skull after a brawl at Maverick Station, said he'd be taking a long voyage over water, and the very next day didn't his boss send him over to Nantasket on a job, and that at least halfway across the bay?

So, naturally, being out of work and running into old Miss Gilhooley having a last brew at Casey's Bar & Grill before taking the bus to her sister's in Framingham for a week's visit, Muldoon wondered why he had never thought of it before. He therefore took his beer and sat down in the booth across from the shawled old Miss Gilhooley and put his problem directly to her.

'The unemployment's about to run out, and it looks like nobody wants no bricks laid no more, at least not by me,' he said simply. 'I need money. How do I get some?'

Old Miss Gilhooley dipped her finger in his beer and traced a pattern across her forehead. Then she closed her eyes for fully a minute by the clock before she opened them.

'How old's your mother-in-law?' she asked in her quavering voice, fixing Muldoon with her steady eyes.

Muldoon stared. 'Seventy-four,' he said, surprised. 'Just last month. Why?'

'I don't rightly know,' old Miss Gilhooley said slowly. 'All I know is I closed me eyes and asked meself, "How can Muldoon come up with some money?" And right away, like in letters of fire across the insides of me eyeballs, I see, "How old is Vera Callahan?" It's got to mean something.'

'Yeah,' Muldoon said glumly. 'But what?'

'I'll miss me bus,' said old Miss Gilhooley, and came to her feet, picking up her ancient haversack. 'It'll come to you, don't worry.' And with a smile she was through the door.

Seventy-four, Muldoon mused as he walked slowly towards the small house he now shared with his mother-in-law. You'd think old Miss Gilhooley might have been a little more lavish with her clues. She'd never been that cryptic before. Seventy-four! Suddenly Muldoon stopped dead in his tracks. There was only one logical solution, and the more he thought about it, the better it looked. Old Miss Gilhooley and Vera Callahan had been lifelong enemies. And his mother-in-law had certainly mentioned her life insurance policy often enough when she first used it ten years before as her passport into the relative security of the Muldoon ménage. And, after all, seventy-four was a ripe old age, four years past the biblical

three score and ten, not to mention being even further beyond the actuarial probabilities.

Muldoon smiled at his own brilliance in solving the enigma so quickly. Doing away with his mother-in-law would be no chore. By Muldoon's figuring, she had to weigh in at about a hundred pounds dripping wet and carrying an anvil in each hand. Nor, he conceded, would her passing be much of a loss. She did little except creep between bed and kitchen and seemed to live on tea. Actually, since the poor soul suffered such a wide variety of voiced ailments, the oblivion offered by the grave would undoubtedly prove welcome.

He thought for a moment of checking with the insurance company as to the exact dollar value of his anticipated inheritance, but then concluded it might smack of greediness. It might also look a bit peculiar when the old lady suffered a fatal attack of something-or-other so soon after the inquiry. Still, he felt sure it would be a substantial amount; old Miss Gilhooley had never failed him before.

When he entered the house, the old lady was stretched out on the couch, taking her afternoon nap (she slept more than a cat, Muldoon thought) and all he had to do was to put one of the small embroidered pillows over her face and lean his two hundred pounds on it for a matter of several minutes, and that was that. She barely wriggled during the process. Muldoon straightened up, removed the pillow, and gazed down. He had been right; he was sure he detected a grateful expression on the dead face. He fluffed the pillow up again, placed it in its accustomed location, and went to call the undertaker.

It was only after all decent arrangements had been made, all hard bargaining concluded, and all the proper papers signed, that Muldoon called the insurance company – and got more than a slight shock. His mother-in-law's insurance was for four hundred dollars, doubtless a princely sum when her doting parents had taken it out a matter of sixty years before, but rather inadequate in this inflationary age. Muldoon tried to cancel the funeral, but the undertaker threatened suit, not to mention a visit from his nephew,

acknowledged dirty-fight champion of all South Boston. The additional amount of money Muldoon had to get up to finally get Vera Callahan underground completely wiped out his meagre savings.

So that, obviously, was not what old Miss Gilhooley had been hinting at, Muldoon figured. He was not bitter, nor was his faith impaired; the fault had to be his own. So there he was with the numbers again. Seventy-four . . . seventy-four. . . . Could they refer to the mathematical possibilities? Four from seven left three – but three what? Three little pigs? Three blind mice? Three blind pigs? He gave it up. On the other hand, four plus seven equalled . . .

He smote himself on the head for his previous stupidity and quickly rubbed the injured spot, for Muldoon was a strong man with a hand like the bumper on a gravel truck. Of course! *Seven and four added up to eleven. ELEVEN!* And – Muldoon told himself with authority – if that wasn't a hint to get into the floating crap game that took place daily, then his grandfather came from Warsaw.

So Muldoon took out a second mortgage on his small house, which netted him eight hundred dollars plus change, added to that the two hundred he got for his three-and-a-half-year-old, secondhand-to-begin-with car, and with the thousand dollars in big bills in his pocket, made his way to Casey's Bar & Grill.

'Casey!' he asked in his ringing voice, 'Where's the floating game today?'

'Callahan Hotel,' Casey said, rinsing glasses. 'Been there all week. Room Seventy-Four.'

Muldoon barely refrained from smiting himself on the head again. How dumb could one guy be? If only he'd asked before, he would not have had to deal with that thief of an undertaker, not to mention the savings he's squandered – although in truth he had to admit the small house was less crowded with the old lady gone.

'Thanks,' he said to Casey, and hurried from the bar.

The group standing around the large dismountable regulation crap table in Room Seventy-Four of the Callahan Hotel,

was big and tough, but Muldoon was far from intimidated. With one thousand dollars in his pocket and his fortune about to be made, Muldoon felt confidence flowing through him like a fourth beer. He nodded to one of the gamblers he knew there and turned to the man next to him, tapping him on the shoulder.

'Got room for one more?' he asked.

'Hunnert dollars minimum,' the man said without looking up from the table. 'No credit.'

Muldoon nodded. It was precisely the game he wanted. 'Who's the last man?' he asked.

'Me,' the man said, and clamped his lips shut.

Muldoon took the money from his pocket and folded the bills lengthwise gambler-fashion, wrapping them around one finger, awaiting his turn. When at last the dice finally made their way to him, Muldoon laid a hundred-dollar bill on the table, picked up the dice, and shook them next to one ear. They made a pleasant, ivory sound. A large smile appeared on Muldoon's face.

'Seven and four are me lucky numbers,' he announced. 'Same as them that's on the door of this room, here. Now, if a guy could only roll an eleven *that* way!'

'He'd end up in a ditch,' the back man said expressionlessly.

'You're faded – roll them dice. Don't wear 'em out.'

Muldoon did not wear out the dice. In fact, he had his hands on them exactly ten times, managing to throw ten consecutive craps, equally divided between snake-eyes and boxcars. They still speak of it at the floating crap game; it seems the previous record was only five and the man who held it took the elevator to the roof – they were playing at some hotel up in Copley Square that day – and jumped off. Muldoon turned the dice over to the man to his right and wandered disconsolately out of the hotel.

Out in the street Muldoon ambled along a bit aimlessly, scuffing his heavy work brogans against anything that managed to get in his way; a tin can, a broken piece of brick he considered with affectionate memory before he kicked it

violently; a crushed cigarette pack. He tried for an empty candy wrapper but with his luck missed. Seventy-four! *Seventy-four!* What in the bleary name of Eustice Q. Peabody could the blaggety numbers mean? (The Sisters had raised Muldoon strictly; no obscenity passed his lips.) He tried to consider the matter logically, forcing his temper under control. Old Miss Gilhooley had never failed him, nor would she this time. He was simply missing the boat.

Seventy-four? Seventy-*four*? The figures began to take on a certain rhythm, like the *Punch, brother, punch with care* of Mark Twain. Muldoon found himself trying to march to it. Seven-ty-four! Seven*ty*-four! He shook his head; it lacked beat. Seventy-four-hup! No. Seven-*ty*-four-*hup!* Better but still not it. The old lady had been seventy-four and now she was zero. He tried that. Seventy-four-zero! Seventy-four-zero-hup! Almost it but not quite. Seven-four-zero-hup! Seven-four-zero, *hup!* Got it! Muldoon said to himself, deriving what little satisfaction he could from the cadence, and marched along swinging. Seven-four-zero, *hup!*

And found himself in front of Casey's Bar & Grill, so he went inside and pulled a stool up to the deserted bar.

'Beer,' he said.

'How'd you do in the game?' Casey asked.

'Better give me a shot with that beer,' Muldoon said by way of an answer. He slugged the shot down, took about half his beer for a chaser, and considered Casey as he wiped his mouth. 'Casey,' he said earnestly, really wanting to know, 'what do the numbers seven and four mean to you?'

'Nothing,' Casey said.

'How about seven, four, and zero?'

'Nothing,' Casey said. 'Maybe even less.'

'How about backwards?' Muldoon asked in desperation, but Casey had gone to the small kitchen in the rear to make himself a sandwich during the slack time, and Muldoon found himself addressing thin air. He tossed the proper amount of change on the counter and started for the door. Where he ran into a small man named O'Leary, who ran

numbers for the mob. It wasn't what he preferred, but it was a living.

'Wanna number today, Mr. Muldoon?' O'Leary asked.

Muldoon was about to pass on with a shake of his head, when he suddenly stopped. A thrill went through him from head to foot. Had he been in a cartoon a light bulb would have lit up in a small circle over his head. Not being in a cartoon, he kicked himself, his heavy brogan leaving a bruise that caused him to limp painfully for the next three weeks.

Good Geoffrey T. Soppingham! He must have been blind! Blind? Insane! What possible meaning could numbers have, if not *that they were numbers*? Just thinking about it made Muldoon groan. If he hadn't killed the old lady and gotten into that stupid crap game, at this moment he could be putting down roughly fifteen-hundred bucks on Seven-Four-Zero. Fifteen-hundred dollars at five-hundred-to-one odds! Still, if he hadn't smothered the old lady, he'd never have come up with the zero, so it wasn't a total loss. But the floating game had been completely unnecessary.

Because now Muldoon didn't have the slightest doubt as to what the numbers meant.

'Somethin' wrong, Mr. Muldoon?' O'Leary asked, concerned with the expression on Muldoon's face.

'No!' Muldoon said, and grasped the runner by the arm, drawing him back into Casey's Bar & Grill, his hand like the clamshell bucket of a steam shovel on the smaller man's bicep. He raised his voice, bellowing. *'Casey!'*

Casey appeared from the kitchen, wiping mayonnaise from his chin. 'Don't shout,' he said. 'What do you want?'

Muldoon was prying his wedding ring from his finger. He laid it down on the bar. 'What'll you give me for this?'

Casey looked at Muldoon as if the other man had suddenly gone mad. 'This ain't no hockshop, Muldoon,' he said.

But Muldoon was paying no attention. He was slipping his wristwatch and its accompanying stretch band over his thick fingers. He placed the watch down on the bar next to the ring.

'One hundred bucks for the lot,' he said simply. 'A loan, is

all. I'll pay it back tonight.' As Casey continued to look at him with fishy eyes, Muldoon added in a quiet, desperate voice, 'I paid sixty bucks each for them rings; me and Kathleen had matching ones. And that watch set me back better than a bill-and-a-half all by itself, not to mention the band, which is pure Speidel. How about it?' A touch of pleading entered his voice. 'Come on; we been friends a long time.'

'Acquaintances,' Casey said, differentiating, and continued to eye Muldoon coldly. 'I ain't got that much cash in the cash register right now.'

'Jefferson J. Billingsly the cash register,' Muldoon said, irked. 'You got that much and more in your pants pocket.'

Casey studied the other a moment longer and then casually swept the ring and the watch from the counter into his palm, and pocketed them. From another pocket he brought out a wallet that looked like it was suffering from mumps. He began counting out bills.

'Ninety-five bucks,' he said. 'Five per cent off the top, just like the Morris Plan.'

Muldoon was about to object, but time was running out.

'Someday we'll discuss this transaction in greater detail, Casey,' he said. 'Out in the alley,' and he turned to O'Leary, grasping both of the smaller man's arms for emphasis. 'O'Leary I want ninety-five bucks on number seven-four-zero. Got it? *Seven-Four-Zero!* Today!'

'*Ninety-five bucks?*' O'Leary was stunned. 'I never wrote no slip bigger than a deuce in my life, Mr. Muldoon,' he said. He thought a moment. 'No, a fin,' he said brightly, but then his face fell. 'No a deuce. I remember now, the fin was counterfeit. . . .'

'You're wasting time,' Muldoon said in a dangerous voice. He suddenly realised he was holding the smaller man several inches from the floor, and lowered him. 'Will they pay off? That's the question,' he said in a quieter voice, prepared for hesitation.

'Sure they pay off, Mr. Muldoon,' O'Leary said, straightening his sleeves into a semblance of their former shape. 'How long you figure they stay alive, they start welching?'

'So long as they know it,' Muldoon said, and handed over the ninety-five bucks. He took his receipt in return, checked the number carefully to make sure O'Leary had made no mistake, and slipped the paper into his pocket. Then he turned to Casey.

'A beer,' he said in a voice that indicated their friendship had suffered damage. 'And take it out of that five bucks you just stole!'

Muldoon was waiting in a booth at Casey's Bar & Grill at seven o'clock p.m., which was the time the runners normally had the final three figures of the national treasury balance – which was the Gospel by St. Carlo Gambino that week. Muldoon knew that straight cash in hand would not be forthcoming; after all, he was due a matter of over forty-seven-thousand dollars. Still he'd take a cheque. If he hadn't gotten into that crap game, he'd have been rich – or, more probably, in a ditch like the man had mentioned this afternoon. Who was going to pay off that kind of loot? No mob in Boston, that was sure. Better this way, Muldoon thought. Forty-seven grand was big enough to be the year's best advertisement for the racket, but still it was enough by their standards for the mob to loosen up.

It was a nice feeling being financially secure after the problems of the past few years, and he certainly had no intention of splurging. All honest debts would be cleared up, of course, and he'd have to buy himself some wheels – a compact, nothing fancy – but the rest would go into the bank. At five per cent it wouldn't earn no fortune, he knew, but it would still be better than a fall off a high scaffold on to a low sidewalk.

He reached for his beer and saw old Miss Gilhooley walking through the door. Had a week passed so quickly? He supposed it must have; what with the funeral, and one thing and another, the time had flown. He waved her over and called out to Casey to bring old Miss Gilhooley anything her heart desired.

Old Miss Gilhooley settled herself in the booth across from him and noted the expression on his face. 'So you figured it out, Muldoon,' she said.

'Not right off,' Muldoon admitted. 'To be honest, it just come to me this afternoon. But better late than never; at least it come.' He leaned over the table confidentially. 'It was the numbers, see? The seven and the four for her age, plus the zero at the end, because whether you heard or not, that's what the poor soul is now.'

Old Miss Gilhooley sipped the beer Casey had brought, and nodded. 'That's what I figured,' she said, 'especially after seeing O'Leary in me dreams three nights running, and me old enough to be his mother.'

'And I can't thank you enough – ' Muldoon started to say, and then paused, for O'Leary had just burst through the door of the bar like a Roman candle, and was hurrying over to them, brushing people aside. His eyes were shining.

'Mr. Muldoon! Mr. Muldoon!' O'Leary cried excitedly. 'I never seen nothin' like it in all me born days! And on a ninety-five dollar bet!'

Muldoon grinned happily.

'Only one number away!' O'Leary cried, still impressed by his close brush with fame. 'Tough you had Seven-Four-Zero. Seven-Five-Zero wins!'

O'Leary sighed, and then put the matter from his mind. After all, life had to go on. 'Wanna number for tomorrow, Mr. Muldoon?'

'No,' Muldoon said in a dazed tone, and turned to old Miss Gilhooley who was making strange noises. But they were not lamentations for Muldoon; to Muldoon's surprise the old lady was cackling like a fiend.

'That Vera Callahan!' she said triumphantly. 'I always *knew* she lied about her age!'

The Capture

James Hay, Jr.

Vinal sat in a plain deal chair near the cold fireplace, his body leaning slightly forward, his hands resting lightly upon his knees. With the exception of two brief interruptions he had been in that position for more than twelve hours, but there was in the lines of his still figure that which suggested desperate expectancy, incessant alertness.

At eleven o'clock that morning he had risen from the chair by inches and tiptoed to the window and, gently pulling aside the thick, dirty curtain, had looked out through a chink in the closed shutters to glance at the two policemen patrolling the pavement outside. In that journey he had not made a sound. Not a board had creaked. There had not been even so much as the scraping of one part of his clothing against another. And again at five o'clock in the afternoon, creeping, a master of silence, he had repeated the pilgrimage and had seen the same patrol. At the back of the house, he knew, was a third blue-coated man.

On the far side of the room was a door and beyond that door were Pole and Dowell, two of the men who had murdered old Sothoron and old Sothoron's wife. He knew they were there. How he knew it he could not have explained. So far as his trained senses had been able to discover, there had

come from the next room during his long wait the sound of neither voice nor motion. He simply felt that they were on the other side of the wall.

He had acted on the supposition that they would do what thousands of others of their kind had done, double on their tracks and return, if possible, to their old refuge. He had figured that if they could enter the house in spite of the one policeman at the rear and the two at the front, he in his pursuit of them could accomplish the same feat.

As he thought of this deduction on his part, and its impending result, he experienced the greatest excitement he ever allowed himself to feel. It was only a question of minutes, at most not more than an hour, before he would have the laugh on the police commissioner. He would make Finkman and his men look like fools; and the famous Bloomer agency, with its cocksure chief, would find itself cheated of its prize at the very time when the city and the entire country expected it to turn its best trick. He liked neither the commissioner nor Kinkman nor the Bloomers. They had never given him a fair chance, and he had a nice sense of revenge. Single-handed he would deliver two of the three murderers to justice that evening.

If he had waited a lifetime he could not have had a better setting for the drama he was about to enact. The newspapers the next morning would grip the imagination of the whole country and lead it irresistibly into the dark room of that miserable house in which he now sat. Because the public mind had been inflamed by the recitals of the outrage, it would read eagerly, even delightedly, the details of the capture of the criminals.

For three days the search for the murderers had spread out, spun itself into a mighty web. The *furor* had been created because of the prominence of the victims, not because of any particular brutality in the commission of the crime. While one man had watched outside the other two had crept into the bedroom, chloroformed the husband and the wife and ransacked the house. To all intents and purposes, so far as the burglars were concerned, the double murder had been

an accident. Instead of stupefying, as they had intended, they had killed.

But immediately the authorities and the newspapers had come forward with the cry: 'The chloroform gang!' They recognised in the tragedy the work of the Chloroform Colonel and his two associates, Dowell and Pole. And because the owners of millions had been done to death, he, Vinal, sat there in the cold, dark room and calculated to a nicety the details of every move he must make to accomplish this triumph unaided, to achieve it in such a way that he – he alone – would stand head and shoulders above the mass of men who made the pursuit of crime their profession.

He had entered the house before daylight that morning, coming up like a spectre out of the wet blackness of the back alley, slipping past the sleepy policeman and disappearing into the areaway in perfect silence. His progress on stockinged feet from the basement to the fourth story of the rickety house had been as quiet as death and laborious enough to wring the sweat from his body.

And yet he should have had no real fear of interruption. The police, having searched the place from top to bottom two days before, had contented themselves with placing the three pickets on the outside – in case the murderers should seize on the perilous chance of doubling back. And if his marvellous intuition had served him right and any of the three had returned to wait for a last play for freedom, they would have made no outcry if he had stumbled against them. They would have realised the futility of further resistance. The average crook, dislodged from his last ditch, makes no fight. In view of these things his care, his fear of outside interference and his incredible patience were sure signs of the eagerness with which he looked forward to the capture.

The time had come for him to act, to put into execution the plan which he had elaborated. On the other side of the flimsy door there were only two men. He knew this. In the first place the Colonel, their leader, would never have beaten back aimlessly to an old haunt. Rather than pen himself up in a place in which either starvation or a second search would

end his career, he would make a daring try for more open ground. Realising that all the machinery of the law was combing clean the retreats of the city, he would strive in every way to get beyond the scope of such a chase. Only the lower intelligence of Pole and Dowell would hold out to them the promise of ultimate escape by such a ruse.

The room was very cold. Vinal wanted to shiver, but checked the impulse. In all the time he had been there he had not moved a muscle unnecessarily. The darkness was in the shuttered, curtained house like a tangible, palpable object. It seemed a solid, oblong formation against which the glare of the street lights beat in vain. And the silence inside was almost as bad. In that vast, crashing, shrieking city it was a separate thing, unchanged and unmoved by the ordinary uproar humanity makes at night. It began to get on his nerves, until he mentally took hold of himself and assured himself that there was nothing uncanny in the affair. It was simply a matter of one man sitting moveless and soundless in one room and two other men equally moveless, equally silent, in the other.

He got to his feet – and it took him two full minutes to reach an upright position – his hands held slightly away from his sides. He moved his fingers, crooking them and straightening them out methodically time and again to get out of them the stiffness that had been caused by the cold. He raised his right foot and put it forward through the darkness in one long step, but when he placed it on the bricks of the hearth nearby it was with a motion as soft as the falling of down. Once on the hearth and away from the danger of creaking boards, he began to rise slowly and repeatedly on the balls of his feet in such a way that the exertion called into play all the muscles of his legs. He did this fifty times, more rapidly towards the last, and always continuing the movements of his fingers.

He went through with it scientifically, utilising the knowledge he had gained in the gymnasium. He had begun to roll his head from side to side when he noticed that his neck, unshaven for thirty-six hours, rasped against his collar. With

slow deftness and short, tedious movement he took off his cravat and, leaning over, placed it carefully on the bricks to one side. He did not drop it. The collar was more difficult. He moistened his fingers with saliva and applied them many times to the buttonholes. When he slipped the first flap from its holding the buttonhole was as soft and wet as if it had been dipped in a river.

His straining ears, ready to receive every sound, could not hear his own work. Outside there was the constant chorus of the city, punctuated now and then by the shrill horn of an automobile or the wail of wheels against the cold steel rails on the Elevated, and continuously there came up from the pavement directly underneath the monotonous pit-pat of the brogans of the slowly promenading policeman. Several times he heard voices guying the officers.

'Watch the Sherlock Holmeses doing a marathon!' one of the street gamins called out.

And another:

'Why don't you go down to the station and wait for 'em to walk in?'

But there was no sound from the next room. He had taken off the collar and laid it down beside the cravat when the thought came to him: 'Suppose they're not there!' He paused, still bowed over, and listened as if to reassure himself. He heard nothing. And yet the old intuition came back to him. They were there. That was the only explanation of why the newsboys at that very moment were crying the extras telling of their remarkable escape. They must be there. They would have thought of no other place when the chase behind them had grown too hot.

He did not falter once in his infinite precaution, his far-reaching calculation of just what each muscle would do, of how he must place each hand and each foot to avoid even the chance of noise. The slightest thing, he knew, would split that block of silence like the thundering blow of a trip-hammer. The blackness pressed upon him and stung him as if he had been made up of the ends of live wires, wires which, in his unnatural imagination, he thought would carry straight

to the ears of the two in the other room the ghost of any sound. But he forced himself to calmness. He could not afford nervousness.

As plainly as if it had been in the room he suddenly heard the rattle of the knob of the door of the house. One of the policemen, varying the monotony of his vigil, had rattled it aimlessly. In an instant he became one degree more alert. The eager desire of his mind sharpened still more his hearing. There had come from the other room a sound. He listened – listened – listened hungrily, painfully. The noise was not repeated. It had not been enough, in the first place, to make a scratch on the hard block of the silence which hemmed him in. And yet he was sure, certain.

He leaned over again and, resting his left hand on the bricks, thrust his right slowly into the fireplace and up the chimney the fraction of an inch. He wanted some of the soot, but none of it must be dislodged and fall into the fireplace. He put the soot with well-considered smears upon his cheeks and nose and forehead. Then, regaining his upright posture, he slowly turned up the soft collar of his coat and buttoned the garment tightly about his slender figure.

He stood hesitant once more, cataloguing in his mind all the things he had done, the limbering and softening of the muscles and ligaments of his body, the removal of his collar and tie, the disfiguring of his face – this being done for two reasons: The blackness of the soot would remove the possibility of his face looming up like a white blur before the men he intended to capture; also, if they discovered him too soon, he would stand a chance to fraternise with them as being, like them, a fugitive. That idea struck him as grimly ludicrous. What would they, the murderers, think if they became convinced that he, fleeing because of some minor offence, was closeted with them in their last house of refuge?

With soft touches he felt that the revolver in the right-hand outer pocket of his coat was as it should be and that the one on the other side was convenient to his immediate reach. He was ready, he told himself. Finkman and the

Bloomers, he reflected, could not have prepared themselves one-half so well for what he was about to do.

Vinal was not a coward. No man with fear in his heart ever could have gone through with that day's watching. But as he put out his right foot and started on that long, apparently interminable journey across the short expanse of flooring between him and the door, the slightest noise of his own making would have thrown him into a panic. Keyed up to an abnormal pitch, his nerves raw from their tension, he was emotionally wide open to any impression, any idea, any happening foreign to his definite undertaking.

It was as if he carried in the balls of his feet premonition of noise. In his trip to the door he travelled at right angles to the boarding of the floor, and he knew that in order to avoid the creaking of the planks he must follow the line of one of the crosspieces underneath the boarding. He found this by instinct and he kept to it unswervingly in his progress.

His sense of direction was extraordinary, weird; the more so because every step he made was almost a half-circle, since he did not dare to tip forward in the ordinary manner. In each groping stride his foot went out to one side from him and forward at the same time, so as to avoid the danger of one trousers leg brushing against the other. And he was guided entirely by the mental picture of what he had seen greyly when the daylight had been sifting through the chinks of the shutters – by that and by the instinctive accuracy with which his light, catlike feet followed the safe part of the flooring.

Within a yard of the door, he stopped midway in the act of letting his weight swing with wearisome slowness from his right foot to his left. He had had neither food nor drink for twenty-four hours, and in the anguished nervousness of his progress he had allowed his mouth to slacken, half-open. It was like that of a runner who, nearing the close of a race, gasps for breath. And all of a sudden he realised that the inhalations went into his lungs with what threatened to be the sound of a low whistle. He closed his lips and hung motionless, balanced halfway in his stride. He listened. There was

nothing except the roar of the city – that and the pit-pat of the policemen's feet.

He put out his hand and moved it forward slowly, slowly as the ages.

The tips of his fingers thrilled and pulsated as if the nerves were not covered by the epidermis. And when they touched the doorjamb he had to hold himself together to keep from starting suddenly, so hard and abrupt seemed the touch when they struck against the woodwork.

Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, his long, lean figure crouched forward more and more until his ear was on a level with the keyhole. He waited five minutes – eight minutes – ten mintues. His hearing was reinforced by his hope of discovering them and his fear of their discovering him. All his senses reached forward into that other room. So great was his concentration that the noises of the city and the echoes of the footsteps down below were at last a million miles away.

He could see the two men exactly as they had been pictured in the newspapers – Pole, little, round-shouldered, pusillanimous; and Dowell, heavy-set, broad-shouldered, bull-necked. Now, more than ever, he knew that they were there – Pole bunched up, terror-stricken, white-lipped, and Dowell a big, immovable lump. But he could not understand why he did not hear their breathing. It was natural that they should not move about. Their consuming fear of discovery would account for this. And yet the fact that they made no sounds whatever was beyond him. If they were breathing, he felt, the sound of it must come to him in that virgin silence.

Then he heard. It was a whisper, low, guarded, but to him it sounded like the crack of a gun, so much so that instinctively and in silent swiftness he put his hands to his revolver pockets.

He listened.

'If they get the Colonel we've got a chance.'

He knew that the voice was Pole's. It was a whisper, but to his ears, incredibly trained, it had in it all the characteristics of a voice. It sounded like the talk of a little, shrill-toned man.

'They won't get him.' Dowell's whisper in reply was like Dowell, slow and heavy.

The silence closed in again.

'For God's sake, we've got to do something! We'll starve to death here.'

Pole's whisper, so low that it seemed scarcely to make a ripple on the ocean of stillness, was freighted nevertheless with a coward's despair.

Vinal, exerting himself as if he wrestled with ten men, had heard every syllable of what had been said. He found himself balanced on his toes, his right arm straightened out behind him, his left pointed forward and downward, as if he were poised agilely and perfectly for instant movement. He hung, light as a feather, in the silence, and yet his muscles were so tense that he looked, too, like a man supporting tremendous weight.

'Don't talk.' Dowell ended the whispering.

Vinal put his hand on the doorknob. His fingers touched it as lightly as grains of dust, and, while all his consciousness was centred on the gigantic task of turning it without noise, somewhere in the back of his mentality he was cursing the necessity of fooling with a thing so pregnant in its possibilities for the ruin of his plan.

It seemed to him afterward that he used up a year of his life in turning the knob. At every fraction of the turn he paused, knowing that, if he went the thousandth of a second faster, the inevitable grating of the latch would follow. He was seized by an insane desire to wrench the door open and charge in with thunderous noise, discharging his guns and shouting at the top of his voice. The silence – silence which was necessary to him – was growing too big, too mysterious for him. It was a torture that multiplied itself every moment.

When he had the latch free of the hasp, there came a repetition of the careful tactics he had already followed. Just as there had been a certainty that the lock would creak, there was the dead-sure thing that the hinges would cry out if urged by more than snail-like motion. As the door opened he began to calculate through his sense of touch just when to

bring it to a stop, and to go through again the crucifying process of letting the latch creep back to the point from which he had started it. While he did this he could hear the breathing of the two men, and gradually, by painful degrees, he began to sense their positions in the room. They were nearer to the window than he had thought and they faced the window. That was the first piece of good fortune he had had. He could work on them from behind.

He took his hand from the knob and the door was still. He took one slow step into the room. It was a motion that required minutes. Three times the ball of his foot touched the flooring and drew back. Each time he knew that, if he had put the weight of ten pounds on that step, the flimsy flooring would have cried out. At the fourth attempt he felt safe – and he could not have explained the feeling to save his soul.

'I wish I had some water,' Pole's little whisper rang out.

Involuntarily there flashed through Vinal's mind a story he had read years before of the carrying power of certain actors' voices. Pole, he thought, undoubtedly would have made a good actor.

Before he took the next step he got both the pistols from his pockets and held them ready. He was possessed by a mania for speed, a wild desire to make a rush, to liberate his muscles from the captivity of care, to throw from his limbs the manacles of tediousness. But as he went forward, gaining at every step a clearer consciousness of where the two men sat, he did not hurry in the slightest. Each contraction of his muscles was as slow as it had been at the hearth in the other room. And even at this moment, when the whole fabric of his success hung on the slender chain of a few silent seconds, he thought with astonishment of how perfectly his mind controlled every smallest atom of his body.

The climax came exactly as he had planned it. He ended the torture of slowness with a rush of motion and cut the stillness with a whisper. With one lightning-like sweep the revolvers flashed through two feet of space and came down, muzzles forward, on the backs of the two men's necks. He could tell by the way the flesh at the end of the right-hand

revolver gave way that the little Pole shrank down in his chair as far as he could. The left-hand gun met the thickness of Dowell's neck and moved only a few inches.

'If you make a sound I'll pull the trigger!' he said, and he put the threat in a murmur scarcely louder than had been the whispers he had heard.

For nearly half a minute the group was motionless – only Pole's breathing began to come and go with a hissing sound.

Finally Dowell broke the stillness.

'What do you want?' he asked aloud, but in a subdued tone.

'Don't do that again!' Vinal's whisper was sharp enough to be like a blow. 'I want you both. I've got you. Now listen. There's another man in this house, and if you make a sound he may make a getaway. You are going with me quietly – or get shot.'

There began in Pole's throat what would have developed into a whimper, but Vinal stopped it with his thumb.

'Now,' he whispered his directions, 'I'll guide you out of this room through the next into the hall and down to the front door. You go the way these guns press you.'

Dowell had made no sign of emotion, except that his breathing was faster. Both he and Pole rose to their feet and turned as Vinal indicated with the revolvers. To be more certain in his guidance he had thrust the muzzles of the revolvers inside their collars.

'Where are your shoes?' he asked, whispering softly.

It was Dowell who replied:

'Over in the corner.'

'They are not in the way? We won't stumble against them?'

'No.'

He was still desirous of silence. Nobody must enter the house to interfere with his work, his capture. He would deliver them at the front door, on the pavement, to the sleepy policemen. But the three could not traverse three flights of stairs without some noise, and this angered him. Whenever his captives made a board creak he gouged them mercilessly

with the revolvers; but he did not whisper.

Quietly, with reasonable quickness, they reached the vestibule. Pole, weak and small, was flinching under every thrust of the revolver against his collarbone. Occasionally he trembled violently. Dowell, knowing that the game was up, went deliberately, almost calmly, as directed by the cold steel inside his collar.

Once or twice Vinal was seized by the impulse he had felt upstairs to shriek, to cry out, to end the thing with a storm of blows and shots. He had been tortured past human endurance ever since entering the house. But whenever he felt the impulse to give way the thought of Finkman and his men, of the Bloomer operators and of the commissioner himself nerved him on for the few remaining minutes.

At the door he flashed his hand from Pole's shoulder and left the revolver hanging in the little man's collar. It was only for the two seconds required to snap back the latch and fling open the door. He grasped the revolver again and thrust the two men before him into the brilliantly lighted street.

'Here!' he called out imperiously. 'Come here, you men! Here they are! Grab 'em!'

Pole and Dowell stood blinking in the light and the two policemen sprang forward, willing but dazed. One of them, the fellow with a red moustache, paused before he leaped, and blew his whistle.

In the twinkling of an eye they had the two captives. As if by magic the street was filled with flying feet and excited cries. Men and women ran from all directions, and on the crest of the wave came other policemen, forming quickly a circle round the two white-faced silent men.

Vinal, with blackened face, shouted excitedly to the red-moustached policeman:

'Got 'em upstairs! Did it all myself! Why, you poor fools – you and your detectives – they've been up there all day!'

Two of the officers rushed into the house to search it again. Another put in a call for a patrol wagon.

From the crowd that was closing more tightly all the time about the captives and the police rang yells and jeers:

'Chickens come home to roost!'

'Oh, your chloroform!'

'Where's de guy dat nipped 'em?'

'Ain't dat little gink a nice lookin' slice of pie!'

When the wagon, carrying its new load of captive wretchedness, rumbled over the cobblestones to the station-house five blocks away the spectators followed only to be stopped at the doorway.

Inside, the desk sergeant was inclined to get out of the situation all the pleasure possible. He grinned affably at Dowell and Pole, who stood near the railing while their clothing was being searched by rough and ready hands.

'I guess the Bloomers got you,' he commented. 'Well, it'll be quick work with you! As soon as we get the Colonel the three of you will hang – hang nice and high.'

This was too much for the nerves of the little, ratlike Pole. He burst into wild hysterical laughter, and fell forward against the desk, beating his skinny hands on the hardwood. He began to shriek, and one of the policemen put a hand over his mouth.

He wrenched his head away.

'Aw!' he squeaked, the tears streaming down his face. 'You poor fools! The Colonel's got a big start on you! The man who brought us down the steps was the Colonel. That was Vinal himself. He's made another getaway!'

The Guide's Story

Dion Henderson

The bank was robbed on the Monday morning after the deer season opened. That was what made it possible, the hunting season, and the snow, which had started on Friday. The town began to fill up with hunters, but then on Saturday when the hunting should have been splendid, the wind shifted, bringing rain, and the back roads turned to mire. Sunday was miserable, with grey scudding clouds and intermittent sleet, but then it got colder and the wind came up strongly in the north. By Monday morning there was driving snow and the hunters stayed.

Joe Grignon, an expert guide, was sitting at the far end of the bar drinking coffee when the three men came into the Lumberjacks' Retreat.

'Hey,' one of them said, 'you hear about the bank robbery?'

They stomped and brushed futilely, the snow melting too quickly and leaving dark wet patches on the red coats. All three wore hunting clothes. So did the men at the bar, except that most of the hunting coats were hung on chairs or piled on benches in the back room. Most of the hunters did not know one another, but they were very friendly. Everyone is always friendly on the first weekend of deer season, but per-

haps most friendly when the weather is bad, preventing competition.

The bar was lined with men, a few still in red coats but the rest, in wool shirts, talking now about the bank robbery; the tables at the side of the barroom were full, and the booths behind, and in the back room Lou Adonis had put plywood across the pool tables and covered it with oilcloth so that there was more space to sit. Across the street there was a line of men two abreast standing dumbly in the snow waiting to get into Jack's Café, and up on the East Main, Ma Hurley had declared a moratorium and sent all the girls over to the hotel to help cook and wait on table.

Joe Grignon sat at the far end of the bar with his coffee, listening to the talk. His red cap, with the green button of the guide's licence, was pushed back so that his curly black hair hung down on his forehead. His scarlet coat, with the four black stripes that once meant it was worth four prime beaver in trade goods, hung dry on the back rest.

There was a momentary small space beside him and a man smelling of freshly oiled leather and new duck and after-shave lotion edged into it. Lou Adonis brought him a beer, looked at Joe Grignon's coffee cup and moved away.

'Well,' the man said cheerfully, 'at least there's a little excitement today.'

Joe Grignon sighed. 'There is, from time to time. If one is patient.'

'But not a bank robbery.'

'No. But usually by now there are several search parties for city hunters who have become lost.'

'That's pretty exciting.'

'Only for the man who is lost,' Joe Grignon said. 'Additionally, by this time there are usually a number of casualties.'

'People getting shot accidentally?'

'There is always that question.'

'That sounds pretty exciting.'

'When the deceased was a dear friend of someone's wife it is occasionally interesting.'

'Are they always deceased?'

'When they were a dear friend of someone's wife,' Joe Grignon said. 'Under such circumstances, the stray bullet is unfailingly accurate.'

The man had been looking sidewise at Joe Grignon and now had identified the guide's licence.

'This is a measure of the weather?'

'One other thing – no one has shot himself, either, so far – not pulling a loaded rifle from a car, nor climbing a fence. Only when the weather is superlatively bad does no one shoot himself.'

'I see,' the man said, smiling now. 'And what does all this mean as far as tomorrow's hunting is concerned?'

'Tell me,' Joe Grignon said, 'what is your line of work?'

'I am a dentist in Chicago.'

'Excellent. It happens that I have a wisdom tooth that is a great nuisance. What do you recommend?'

'Well, I could give you an appointment, and you could come to my office. I would be glad to look at it.'

'Just so,' Joe Grignon said, 'and I am a guide. If you would put a hundred dollars on the bar, I would be glad to discuss hunting with you for one full day. But it will have to be next year because I do not have any appointments open this season.'

'Excuse me,' the man said. 'I did not mean to be rude.'

'Of course not. It was entirely accidental.'

After the dentist left, Joe Grignon sat at the bar, with the little space beside him. He could see down the length of the bar through the front window, past the moving silhouette of Lou Adonis, and the stationary silhouette of the palms in the window. Outside, the sheriff's car lumbered heavily up the street, paused briefly and a man wearing a lynx parka over his blue uniform stepped out and walked awkwardly but expertly through the snow towards the Lumberjacks' Retreat. The snow in the street was nearly knee deep now, very wet, with the bottom inch or two watery slush so that it did not pack under traffic but sloshed to one side and formed again.

The man in the blue uniform dropped his parka on a pile of other coats and moved into the space beside Joe Grignon.

'You're a lousy policeman,' Joe said. 'Why aren't you out chasing bank robbers?'

'I'm not a policeman,' John MacKenzie said. 'I'm a game warden. The hell with bank robbers.'

'Maybe the sheriff will say the hell with poachers, when the Indians start dropping dynamite in the Eau Bois next spring.'

'The sheriff doesn't need help on bank robberies; he has the F.B.I.'

'So,' Grignon said. 'They do not think you are a policeman either.'

'They do not seem convinced that the sheriff is a policeman. I left when they discussed whether to give him permission to go to the bathroom.'

'All right. The hell with bank robbers.'

'Good,' the game warden said. 'Let's talk about hunting.'

'What hunting?'

'Your party must be getting a little nervous. They have invested a lot of money in you, and there is no hunting.'

Joe Grignon shrugged. 'It doesn't matter. For their investment they are guaranteed a deer.'

'Even if there is no hunting?'

'There is always a little hunting.' Joe Grignon smiled disarmingly. 'After all, I am a very dependable guide.'

MacKenzie scowled.

'And now,' Grignon said gaily, 'you have visions of a hidden shack where I already have killed and dressed five fine bucks with impressive racks, in the event that there is no hunting.'

'There are only four in your party, I heard,' the game warden said, scowling.

'Five is to provide a choice,' Grignon said. 'Then there is one left over for Father Grenville's poor.'

'Sure there is.'

'One must never forget the church and its charitable works,' Grignon said. 'One never knows when there will be need for the prayers of little children.'

'Let me catch you with five deer hanging up some place,' the warden said stubbornly.

'That is the only way you'll catch me,' Grignon said, still smiling. 'If I let you.'

'Everybody lies a little. A man from the city tried to check a jackass through Savage's Station yesterday. He said he thought he shot a mule deer.'

'Sometimes it is hard to tell.'

'A jackass from a mule deer?'

'No,' Grignon said. 'Whether a man lies a little.'

MacKenzie still was considering the alternatives involved when someone new came in the front door. He was wearing a topcoat, a business suit soaked to the knees, and a smart felt hat, and when he took it off to shake away the snow he had a trim eastern haircut. He looked around the steamy haze of the barroom, and when he saw the blue uniform at the end of the bar he came forward purposefully.

'A friend of yours, MacKenzie?'

'Maybe the sheriff has locked himself in the bathroom.'

The young man stood very close behind them and said quietly, 'Is this the guide?'

'Yes, sir,' Mackenzie answered.

'Je suis Grignon,' Grignon said.

'Does he speak English?'

'Very little,' Grignon said. 'Un petit.'

'Good,' the young man said seriously. 'You may speak it now.'

'Certainement.'

The warden looked straight ahead out the window.

The young man said, 'Someone left the bank in a great hurry this morning. It is why I am here.'

Grignon said, 'You mean the bank robber?'

'I am not prepared to discuss what has transpired,' the young man said stiffly.

'Pardonnez mois.'

'English, please.'

'Excuse me. English it is.'

'Very good. As I was saying, a man left the bank.'

'You said that.'

'Never mind. The point is, I would like to ask you a question.'

'It is nearly noon.'

'I am not authorised to buy you any lunch.'

'Only to ask the question.'

'That is correct.'

'Excuse me,' Grignon said, 'but I have forgotten the question.'

'I haven't asked it yet.'

'Oh.'

'Are you sure,' the young man said to MacKenzie, 'that this is the best guide in the country?'

'Yes,' MacKenzie said.

'Merci,' Joe Grignon said. 'Beaucoup. And you are the finest game warden.'

'He's the only game warden,' the young man said. 'My question is, how far could a man go on foot on a day like this?'

'After leaving the bank in a hurry?'

'All right, after leaving the bank in a hurry.'

'Carrying money?'

'Say he was carrying money.'

'A mile,' Joe Grignon said. 'Possibly two, if he were strong.'

'Very good,' the young man said. 'Is there any place within that distance where he might successfully seclude himself?'

'Even three miles,' Grignon said thoughtfully. 'If the money were very light.'

MacKenzie said warningly, 'Answer the question.'

'There is such a place,' Grignon said. 'Is there not, MacKenzie?'

'I know of no such place,' the warden said.

The young man waited.

'It is just possible,' Grignon said, 'that in all the length and breadth of the Coupe de Foudre, Monsieur, from the Coteau des Gros Pins on the south, along the vast watershed of Les Guerrières and the twinkling waters of La Belle Lac des Mille et Une Lacs, to the forbidding frontier of Le Pay d'en

Haut, there is one secluded place which is known to me but not to my good friend the warden.'

'Yes,' MacKenzie said, almost to himself. 'Where he hangs the bloody deer.'

The young man ignored MacKenzie.

'Take me there?'

'If you agree not to tell the warden.'

'I cannot make any agreement like that.'

Grignon shrugged. 'Then let the warden take you.'

'But you heard him. He does not know of any such place.'

'Yes, I heard him.'

'It is your duty,' the young man said earnestly, staring at Grignon.

'That's different,' Grignon said. 'I am very public-spirited.'

'Then you'll take me?'

'Of course. Since it is my duty.'

'If I were you,' the warden said, 'I would not go.'

'That is because you are not public-spirited,' Grignon told him. 'In addition, you have an evil mind.'

'When?' the young man said. 'When can we go?'

Grignon looked at his watch, then turned on his stool and squinted across the room at a calendar.

'Tomorrow,' he said. 'If it stops snowing. If not then, possibly next week. Certainly,' he said, 'in the spring.'

The young man's face went through minute tightening stages before it turned red. 'Thank you for your time,' he said tightly.

When he was gone, Grignon laughed until he wept. MacKenzie sat staring stonily out the window. It was a great effort.

'You are pretty funny,' he said. 'But it will not be so funny for the man who robbed the bank.'

'You have faith that they will catch him?'

'Of course,' the warden said. 'They always do. A man cannot get off the road in this weather, and the roads are so bad he cannot get away fast. They have all the roads blocked for a hundred miles, and when the snow stops they will have the aeroplanes up. Even if he gets away, they will have a thread

from his hunting coat, or a couple of numbers from a licence plate, or perhaps from his hunting licence tag, and they will spend months quietly running things through the analysers and computers and next year they will rap on someone's door and say politely, "You're under arrest." '

'The way you explain it,' Grignon said, 'it is all very complicated.'

MacKenzie looked sidewise, suspiciously.

'It is fortunate that you became a game warden,' Grignon said. 'I do not think you have the head for this other work.'

'You are not very much impressed.'

'Un peu,' Grignon said, 'as they used to say back in the French seminar at the mission school.'

'Sure they did.'

'Suppose it were not so complicated,' Grignon said. 'Suppose a man were sitting at a bar somewhere, and it was very dull, and he thought it might be interesting to rob a bank.'

'All right, suppose he were.'

'Suppose he knew that Albert Tangora arrives at his bank an hour before the first teller, without fail.'

'That is no great supposition. Everyone here knows about it.'

'And it is Monday morning, and the night depository is very full, from the first weekend of deer hunting when there was no hunting, but only the saloons and the hotel and Ma Hurley's, and the bags in the night depository are full of dirty, wrinkled old money that does not at the moment have any recorded pedigree, being of all denominations and numbers and quite unrelated.'

'You're right,' MacKenzie said. 'This is very interesting.'

'So suppose this man at the crowded bar announces he must make a short trip to the washroom, and goes back through the arch, and from the great pile of hunting coats he selects one, and from another a stocking cap, and takes a cased rifle from the stack in the corner, and walks out the side door in the driving snow and up the alley to the bank.'

MacKenzie did not say anything.

'And with the stocking cap pulled over his face, permitting him to see clearly through the yarn, he huddles at the front door of the bank in the snow, and taps on the glass, and Albert Tangora lifts the green shade and peeks out at him, seeing only a forlorn hunter huddling against the storm, what does he think?'

MacKenzie said, 'You know what he would think, old Tangora. He would think about some poor devil needing to cash a cheque because he played poker too long, or went to sleep at Ma Hurley's, and he would twitch his nose and giggle and speculate on all the details while he stood peeking out under the shade.'

'Just so. And then he would open the door,' Grignon said. 'Would he not?'

'Yes,' MacKenzie said. 'The old fool.'

'Now,' said Joe Grignon, 'suppose that when he opened the door, the man outside came in very quickly with the wind and the snow and judiciously poked Albert Tangora in his fat belly with one end of the cased rifle, and when Albert bent over with a mighty grunt, the man then thumped him sufficiently on the head with the other end.'

MacKenzie said thoughtfully, 'It would not take a man long, then, to empty the money from the bags in the night depository, and to walk out.'

'Locking the door behind him,' said Joe Grignon. 'And then walking rapidly with his head down against the snow, like a hundred other men in the same block on the same sidewalk, return down the alley, put the rifle in the stack, the coat on the bench and resume his place at the bar, all in less time than it would have taken for him to wait his turn there at the bathroom.'

The warden looked hard out the window. The snow was beginning to let up. Several men at the bar began to talk about going hunting, and a few straggled after their coats. The warden sighed heavily.

'It is too simple,' he said. 'Even if it were that simple, he eventually would start to spend the money and then he would be caught.'

'I am not sure,' Grignon said. 'Suppose it were not the money, after all. Suppose when he returned with the coat pockets stuffed full of money, he took a handful and put it in this coat, and another handful in that coat, and so on. There must be fifty coats back there on the bench, to say nothing of those that are hung carefully on the racks.'

'You make a joke of it,' MacKenzie said, 'but a bank robbery is not a joke. Whatever it is, it is no joke.'

'Even so,' Grignon was smiling. 'Do you remember my grandfather?'

'The one who killed the bear with the hatchet?'

'Now you have it.' Grignon still was smiling but he was very serious. 'For this reason, he is very well remembered, even by those who have no idea whether he really killed the bear, even,' he said slyly, 'though I am not sure myself that there was any evidence at the time that would have stood up in court.'

'Except the dead bear.'

'Of course. There was the bear, in the one case. In another there might be something else.'

'Money, for instance.'

'You are very quick, for a Scotsman.'

MacKenzie said nothing. He picked up his coffee cup, sipped, then made a small disgusted sound because the coffee was cold.

Grignon said gently, 'When my grandfather was young, a man who felt himself different than other men did not have to talk about it. He could fight a bear, and there was no need for talk.'

'Unless the bear won.'

'The risk is essential,' Grignon said. 'Each man who would be daring must find the ultimate risk, in his own way.'

Outside, the snow was definitely stopping, and hunters were beginning to leave. One stopped at the bar to pay for the last round of drinks, put his hand in the pocket of his red coat and took it out. Startled, he looked at the wad of ten and twenty dollar bills in his hand. Then, quickly,

he took a ten from the wad and tossed it on the bar and left.

'After all,' Joe Grignon said smiling. 'What does money matter, so long as one has one's health, n'est ce pas?'

Woodrow Wilson's Necktie

Patricia Highsmith

The façade of MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS glittered and throbbed with red and yellow lights, even in the daytime. Knobs of golden balls – the yellow lights – pulsated amid the red lights, attracting the eye and holding it.

Clive Wilkes loved the place, the inside and the outside equally. Since he was a delivery boy for a grocery store, it was easy for him to say that a certain delivery had taken him longer than had been expected – he'd had to wait for Mrs. So-and-so to get home because the doorman had told him she was due back any minute, or he'd had to go five blocks to find some change because Mrs. Smith had had only a twenty-dollar bill. At these spare moments – and Clive managed one or two a week – he visited MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS.

Inside the establishment you went through a dark passage – to be put in the mood – and then you were confronted by a bloody murder scene on the left: a girl with long blonde hair was sticking a knife into the neck of an old man who sat at a kitchen table eating his dinner. His dinner consisted of two wax frankfurters and wax sauerkraut. Then came the Lindbergh kidnapping scene, with Hauptmann climbing down a ladder outside a nursery window; you could see the top of the

ladder out the window, and the top half of Hauptmann's figure, clutching the little boy. Also there was Marat in his bath with Charlotte nearby. And Christie with his stocking, throttling a woman.

Clive loved every tableau, and they never became stale. But he didn't look at them with the solemn, vaguely startled expression of the other people who looked at them. Clive was inclined to smile, even to laugh. They were amusing. So why not laugh?

Farther on in the museum were the torture chambers – one old, one modern, purporting to show Twentieth Century torture methods in Nazi Germany and in French Algeria. Madame Thibault – who Clive strongly suspected did not exist – kept up to date. There were the Kennedy assassinations and the Tate massacre, of course, and some murder that had happened only a month ago somewhere.

Clive's first definite ambition in regard to MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS museum was to spend a night there. This he did one night, providently taking along a cheese sandwich in his pocket. It was fairly easy to accomplish. Clive knew that three people worked in the museum proper – down in the bowels, as he thought of it, though the museum was on street level – while a fourth, a plumpish middle-aged man in a nautical cap, sold tickets at a booth in front. The three who worked in the bowels were two men and a woman; the woman, also plump and with curly brown hair and glasses and about forty, took the tickets at the end of the dark corridor, where the museum proper began.

One of the inside men lectured constantly, though not more than half the people ever bothered to listen. 'Here we see the fanatical expression of the true murderer, captured by the supreme wax artistry of Madame Thibault' – and so on. The other inside man had black hair and black-rimmed glasses like the woman, and he just drifted around, shooing away kids who wanted to climb into the tableaux, maybe watching for pickpockets, or maybe protecting women from unpleasant assaults in the semi-darkness. Clive didn't know.

He only knew it was quite easy to slip into one of the dark

corners or into a nook next to one of the Iron Molls – maybe even into one of the Iron Molls; but slender as he was, the spikes might poke into him, Clive thought, so he ruled out this idea. He had observed that people were gently urged out around 9.15 p.m., as the museum closed at 9.30 p.m. And lingering as late as possible one evening, Clive had learned that there was a sort of cloakroom for the staff behind a door in one back corner, from which direction he had also heard the sound of a toilet flushing.

So one night in November, Clive concealed himself in the shadows, which were abundant, and listened to the three people as they got ready to leave. The woman – whose name turned out to be Mildred – was lingering to take the money box from Fred, the ticket seller, and to count it and deposit it somewhere in the cloakroom. Clive was not interested in the money. He was only interested in spending a night in the place and being able to boast he had.

'Night, Mildred – see you tomorrow,' called one of the men.

'Anything else to do? I'm leaving now,' said Mildred. 'Boy, am I tired! But I'm still going to watch Dragon Man tonight.'

'Dragon Man,' the other man repeated, uninterested.

Evidently the ticket seller, Fred, left from the front of the building after handing in the money box, and in fact Clive recalled seeing him close up the front once, cutting the lights from inside the entrance door, then locking the door and barring it on the outside.

Clive stood in a nook by an Iron Moll. When he heard the back door shut and the key turn in the lock, he waited for a moment in delicious silence, aloneness, and suspense, and then ventured out. He went first, on tiptoe, to the room where they kept their coats, because he had never seen it. He had brought matches – also cigarettes, though smoking was not allowed, according to several signs – and with the aid of a match he found the light switch. The room contained an old desk, four metal lockers, a tin wastebasket, an umbrella stand, and some books in a bookcase against a grimy wall

that had once been white. Clive slid open a drawer and found the well-worn wooden box which he had once seen the ticket seller carrying in through the front door. The box was locked. He could walk out with the box, Clive thought, but he didn't care to, and he considered this rather decent of himself. He gave the box a wipe with the side of his hand, not forgetting the bottom where his fingertips had touched. That was funny, he thought, wiping something he wasn't going to steal.

Clive set about enjoying the night. He found the lights and put them on so that the booths with the gory tableaux were all illuminated. He was hungry, took one bite of his sandwich, then put it back in the paper napkin in his pocket. He sauntered slowly past the John F. Kennedy assassination – Mrs. Kennedy and the doctors bending anxiously over the white table on which J. F. K. lay. This time, Hauptmann's descent of the ladder made Clive giggle. Charles Lindbergh, Jr.'s face looked so untroubled that one would think he might be sitting on the floor of his nursery, playing with blocks.

Clive swung a leg over a metal bar and climbed into the Judd-Snyder tableau. It gave him a thrill to be standing right *with* them, inches from the throttling-from-behind which the lover of the woman was administering to the husband. Clive put a hand out and touched the red-paint blood that was seeming to come from the man's throat where the cord pressed deep. Clive also touched the cool cheekbones of the victim. The popping eyes were of glass, vaguely disgusting, and Clive did not touch those.

Two hours later he was singing church hymns, *Nearer My God to Thee* and *Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam*. Clive didn't know all the words. And he smoked.

By two in the morning he was bored and tried to get out by both the front door and back, but couldn't – both were barred on the outside. He had thought of having a hamburger at an all-night diner between here and home. However, his enforced incarceration didn't bother him, so he finished the now-dry cheese sandwich and slept for a bit on three straight chairs which he arranged in a row. It was so uncomfortable that he knew he'd wake up in a while, which

he did – at 5.00 a.m. He washed his face, then went for another look at the wax exhibits. This time he took a souvenir – Woodrow Wilson's necktie.

As the hour of 9.00 approached – MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS opened at 9.30 a.m. – Clive hid himself in an excellent spot, behind one of the tableaux whose backdrop was a black-and-gold Chinese screen. In front of the screen was a bed and in the bed lay a wax man with a handlebar moustache, who was supposed to have been poisoned by his wife.

The public began to trickle in shortly after 9.30 a.m., and the taller, more solemn man began to mumble his boring lecture. Clive had to wait till a few minutes past ten before he felt safe enough to mingle with the crowd and make his exit, with Woodrow Wilson's necktie rolled up in his pocket. He was a bit tired, but happy – though on second thought, who would he tell about it? Joey Vrasky, that dumb cluck who worked behind the counter at Simmons's Grocery? Hah! Why bother? Joey didn't deserve a good story. Clive was half an hour late for work.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Simmons, I overslept,' Clive said hastily, but he thought quite politely, as he came into the store. There was a delivery job awaiting him. Clive took his bicycle and put the carton on a platform in front of the handlebars.

Clive lived with his mother, a thin highly strung woman who was a saleswoman in a shop that sold stockings, girdles, and underwear. Her husband had left her when Clive was nine. She had no other children. Clive had quit high school a year before graduation, to his mother's regret, and for a year he had done nothing but lie around the house or stand on street corners with his pals. But Clive had never been very chummy with any of them, for which his mother was thankful, as she considered them a worthless lot. Clive had had the delivery job at Simmons's for nearly a year now, and his mother felt that he was settling down.

When Clive came home that evening at 6.30 p.m. he had a story ready for his mother. Last night he had run into his old friend Richie, who was in the Army and home on leave, and

they had sat up at Richie's house talking so late that Richie's parents had invited him to stay over, and Clive had slept on the couch. His mother accepted his explanation. She made a supper of baked beans, bacon, and eggs.

There was really no one to whom Clive felt like telling his exploit of the night. He couldn't have borne someone looking at him and saying, 'Yeah? So what?' because what he had done had taken a bit of planning, even a little daring. He put Woodrow Wilson's tie among his others that hung over a string on the inside of his closet door. It was a grey silk tie, conservative and expensive-looking. Several times that day Clive imagined one of the two men in the museum, or maybe the woman named Mildred, glancing at Woodrow Wilson and exclaiming, 'Hey! What happened to Woodrow Wilson's tie, I wonder?'

Each time Clive thought of this he had to duck his head to hide a smile.

After twenty-four hours, however, the exploit had begun to lose its charm and excitement. Clive's excitement only rose again – and it could rise two or three times a day – whenever he cycled past the twinkling façade of MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS. His heart would give a leap, his blood would run a little faster, and he would think of all the motionless murders going on in there, and all the stupid faces of Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Q. Public gaping at them. But Clive didn't even buy another ticket – price 65 cents – to go in and look at Woodrow Wilson and see that his tie was missing and his collar button showing – his work.

Clive did get another idea one afternoon, a hilarious idea that would make the public sit up and take notice. Clive's ribs trembled with suppressed laughter as he pedalled towards Simmons's having just delivered a bag of groceries.

When should he do it? Tonight? No, best to take a day or so to plan it. It would take brains. And silence. And sure movements – all the things Clive admired.

He spent two days thinking about it. He went to his local snack bar and drank beer and played pinball machines with his pals. The pinball machines had pulsating lights too –

More Than One Can Play and *It's More Fun to Compete* – but Clive thought only of MADAME THIBAULT'S as he stared at the rolling, bouncing balls that mounted a score he cared nothing about. It was the same when he looked at the rainbow-coloured jukebox whose blues, reds, and yellows undulated, and when he went over to drop a coin in it. He was thinking of what he was going to do in MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS.

On the second night, after a supper with his mother, Clive went to MADAME THIBAULT'S and bought a ticket. The old guy who sold tickets barely looked at people, he was so busy making change and tearing off the stubs, which was just as well. Clive went in at 9.00 p.m.

He looked at the tableaux, though they were not so fascinating to him tonight as they had been before. Woodrow Wilson's tie was still missing, as if no one had noticed it, and Clive chuckled over this. He remembered that the solemn-faced pickpocket-watcher – the drifting snoop – had been the last to leave the night Clive had stayed, so Clive assumed he had the keys, and therefore he ought to be the last to be killed.

The woman was the first. Clive hid himself beside one of the Iron Molls again, while the crowd ambled out, and when Mildred walked by him, in her hat and coat, to leave by the back door, having just said something to one of the men in the exhibition hall, Clive stepped out and wrapped an arm around her throat from behind.

She made only a small *ur-rk* sound.

Clive squeezed her throat with his hands, stopping her voice. At last she slumped, and Clive dragged her into a dark, recessed corner to the left of the cloakroom. He knocked an empty cardboard box of some kind over, but it didn't make enough noise to attract the attention of the two men.

'Mildred gone?' one of the men asked.

'I think she's in the office.'

'No, she's not.' The owner of the voice had already gone into the corridor where Clive crouched over Mildred and had looked into the empty cloakroom where the light was

still on. 'She's left. Well, I'm calling it a day too.'

Clive stepped out then and encircled this man's neck in the same manner. The job was more difficult, because the man struggled, but Clive's arm was thin and strong; he acted with swiftness and knocked the man's head against the wooden floor.

'What's going on?' The thump had brought the second man.

This time Clive tried a punch to the man's jaw, but missed and hit his neck. However, this so stunned the man – the little solemn fellow, the snoop – that a quick second blow was easy, and then Clive was able to take him by the shirt-front and bash his head against the plaster wall which was harder than the wooden floor. Then Clive made sure that all three were dead. The two men's heads were bloody. The woman was bleeding slightly from her mouth. Clive reached for the keys in the second man's pockets. They were in his left trousers pocket and with them was a penknife. Clive also took the knife.

Then the taller man moved slightly. Alarmed, Clive opened the pearl-handled penknife and plunged it into the man's throat three times.

Close call, Clive thought, as he checked again to make sure they were all dead. They most certainly were, and that was most certainly real blood, not the red paint of MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS. Clive switched on the lights for the tableaux and went into the exhibition hall for the interesting task of choosing exactly the right places for the three corpses.

The woman belonged in Marat's bath – not much doubt about that. Clive debated removing her clothing, but decided against it, simply because she would look much funnier sitting in a bath wearing a fur-trimmed coat and hat. The figure of Marat sent him off into laughter. He'd expected sticks for legs, and nothing between the legs, because you couldn't see any more of Marat than from the middle of his torso up; but Marat had no legs at all and his wax body ended just below the waist in a fat stump which was planted

on a wooden platform so that it would not topple. This crazy waxwork Clive carried into the cloakroom and placed squarely in the middle of the desk. He then carried the woman – who weighed a good deal – on to the Marat scene and put her in the bath. Her hat fell off, and he pushed it on again, a bit over one eye. Her bloody mouth hung open.

Good lord, it *was* funny!

Now for the men. Obviously, the one whose throat he had knifed would look good in the place of the old man who was eating wax franks and sauerkraut, because the girl behind him was supposed to be stabbing him in the throat. This took Clive some fifteen minutes. Since the figure of the old man was in a seated position, Clive put him on the toilet off the cloakroom. It was terribly amusing to see the old man seated on the toilet, throat apparently bleeding, a knife in one hand and a fork in the other. Clive lurched against the door jamb, laughing loudly, not even caring if someone heard him, because it was so comical it was even worth getting caught for.

Next, the little snoop. Clive looked around him and his eye fell on the Woodrow Wilson scene which depicted the signing of the armistice in 1918. A wax figure sát at a huge desk signing something, and that was the logical place for a man whose head was almost split open. With some difficulty Clive got the pen out of the wax man's fingers, laid it on one side on the desk, and carried the figure - it didn't weigh much – into the cloakroom, where Clive seated him at the desk, rigid arms in an attitude of writing. Clive stuck a ballpoint pen into his right hand. Now for the last heave. Clive saw that his jacket was now quite spotted with blood and he would have to get rid of it, but so far there was no blood on his trousers.

Clive dragged the second man to the Woodrow Wilson tableau, lifted him up, and rolled him towards the desk. He got him on to the chair, but the head toppled forward on to the green-blottered desk, on to the blank wax pages, and the pen barely stood upright in the limp hand.

But it was done. Clive stood back and smiled. Then he listened. He sat down on a straight chair and rested for a few minutes, because his heart was beating fast and he suddenly

realised that every muscle in his body was tired. Ah, well, he now had the keys. He could lock up, go home, and have a good night's rest, because he wanted to be ready to enjoy tomorrow.

Clive took a sweater from one of the male figures in a log-cabin tableau of some kind. He had to pull the sweater down over the feet of the waxwork to get it off, because the arms would not bend; it stretched the neck of the sweater, but he couldn't help that. Now the wax figure had a sort of bib for a shirtfront, and naked arms and chest.

Clive wadded up his jacket and went everywhere with it, erasing fingerprints from whatever he thought he had touched. He turned the lights off, made his way carefully to the back door, locked and barred it behind him, and would have left the keys in a mailbox if there had been one; but there wasn't, so he dropped the keys on the rear doorstep. In a wire rubbish basket he found some newspapers; he wrapped up his jacket in them and walked on with it until he found another wire rubbish basket, where he forced the bundle down among candy wrappers, beer cans, and other trash.

'A new sweater?' his mother asked that night.

'Richie gave it to me – for luck.'

Clive slept like the dead, too tired to even laugh again at the memory of the old man sitting on the toilet.

The next morning Clive was standing across the street when the ticket seller arrived just before 9.30 a.m. By 9.35 a.m. only four people had gone in; but Clive could not wait any longer, so he crossed the street and bought a ticket. Now the ticket seller was doubling as ticket taker, and telling people, 'Just go on in. Everybody's late this morning.'

The ticket man stepped inside the door to put on some lights, then walked all the way into the place to put on the display lights for the tableaux, which worked from switches in the hall that led to the cloakroom. And the funny thing, to Clive who was walking behind him, was that the ticket man didn't notice anything odd, didn't even notice Mildred in her hat and coat sitting in Marat's bathtub.

The other customers so far were a man and a woman, a boy

of fourteen or so in sneakers, alone apparently, and a single man. They looked expressionlessly at Mildred in the tub as if they thought it quite 'normal', which would have sent Clive into paroxysms of mirth, except that his heart was thumping madly and he could hardly breathe for the suspense. Also, the man with his face in franks and sauerkraut brought no surprise either. Clive was a bit disappointed.

Two more people came in, a man and a woman.

Then at last, in front of Woodrow Wilson tableau, there was a reaction. One of the women, clinging to her husband's arm, asked. 'Was someone shot when the armistice was signed?'

'I don't know. I don't *think* so,' the man replied vaguely.

Clive's laughter pressed like an explosion in his chest; he spun on his heel to control himself, and he had the feeling he knew *all* about history, and that no one else did. By now, of course, the real blood had turned to a rust colour. The green blotter was now splotched, and the blood had dripped down the side of the desk.

A woman on the other side of the room, where Mildred was, let out a scream.

A man laughed, but only briefly.

Suddenly everything happened. A woman shrieked, and at the same time a man yelled, 'My God, it's *real*!'

Clive saw a man climbing up to investigate the corpse with his face in the frankfurters.

'The blood's *real*! It's a *dead* man!'

Another man – one of the public – slumped to the floor. He had fainted.

The ticket seller came bustling in. 'What's the trouble here?'

'Coupla corpses – *real* ones!'

Now the ticket seller looked at Marat's bathtub and fairly jumped into the air with surprise, 'Holy Christmas! *Holy* cripes! – it's *Mildred*!'

'And this one!'

'And the one here!'

'My God, got to – got to call the police!' said the ticket seller.

One man and woman left hurriedly. But the rest lingered, shocked, fascinated.

The ticket seller had run into the cloakroom, where the telephone was, and Clive heard him yell something. He'd seen the man at the desk, of course, the wax man, and the half body of Marat on the desk.

Clive thought it was time to drift out, so he did, sidling his way through a group of people peering in the front door, perhaps intending to come in because there was no ticket seller.

That was good. Clive thought. That was all right. Not bad. Not bad at all.

He had not intended to go to work that day, but suddenly he thought it wiser to check in and ask for the day off. Mr. Simmons was of course as sour as ever when Clive said he was not feeling well, but as Clive held his stomach and appeared weak, there was little old Simmons could do. Clive left the grocery. He had brought with him all his ready cash, about $23.

Clive wanted to take a long bus ride somewhere. He realised that suspicion might fall on him, if the ticket seller remembered his coming to MADAME THIBAULT'S often, or especially if he remembered Clive being there last night; but this really had little to do with his desire to take a bus ride. His longing for a bus ride was simply, somehow, irresistible. He bought a ticket westward for $8 and change, one way. This brought him, by about 7.00 p.m., to a good-sized town in Indiana, whose name Clive paid no attention to.

The bus spilled a few passengers, Clive included, at a terminal, where there was a cafeteria and a bar. By now Clive was curious about the newspapers, so he went to the newsstand near the street door of the cafeteria. And there were the headlines:

Triple Murder in Waxworks
Mass Murder in Museum
Mystery Killer Strikes: Three Dead in Waxworks

Clive liked the last one best. He bought the three newspapers, and stood at the bar with a beer.

'This morning at 9.30 a.m., ticket-man Fred J. Carmody and several of the public who had come to see Madam Thibault's Waxwork Horrors, a noted attraction of this city, were confronted by three genuine corpses among the displays. They were the bodies of Mrs. Mildred Veery, 41; George P. Hartley, 43; and Richard K. McFadden, 37, all employed at the waxworks museum. The two men were killed by concussion and stabbing, and the woman by strangulation. Police are searching for clues on the premises. The murders are believed to have taken place shortly before 10.00 p.m. last evening, when the three employees were about to leave the museum. The murderer or murderers may have been among the last patrons of the museum before closing time at 9.30 p.m. It is thought that he or they may have concealed themselves somewhere in the museum until the rest of the patrons had left . . .'

Clive was pleased. He smiled as he sipped his beer. He hunched over the papers, as if he did not wish the rest of the world to share his pleasure, but this was not true. After a few minutes Clive stood up and looked to the right and left to see if anyone else among the men and women at the bar was also reading the story. Two men were reading newspapers, but Clive could not tell if they were reading about him, because their newspapers were folded.

Clive lit a cigarette and went through all three newspapers to see if any clue to him was mentioned. He found nothing. One paper said specifically that Fred. J. Carmody had not noticed any person or persons entering the museum last evening who looked suspicious.

'. . . Because of the bizarre arrangement of the victims and of the displaced wax figures in the exhibition, in whose places the victims were put, police are looking for a psychopathic

killer. Residents of the area have been warned by radio and television to take special precautions on the streets and to keep their houses locked.'

Clive chuckled over that one. Psychopathic killer! He was sorry about the lack of detail, the lack of humour in the three reporters' stories. They might have said something about the old guy sitting on the toilet. Or the fellow signing the armistice with the back of his head bashed in. Those were strokes of genius. Why didn't they appreciate them?

When he finished his beer, Clive walked out on to the sidewalk. It was now dark and the streetlights were on. He enjoyed looking around in the new town, looking into shop windows. But he was aiming for a hamburger place, and he went into the first one he came to. It was a diner made up to look like a crack railway car.

Clive ordered a hamburger and a cup of coffee. Next to him were two Western-looking men in cowboy boots and rather soiled broad-brimmed hats. Was one a sheriff, Clive wondered? But they were talking, in a drawl, about acreage somewhere. Land. They were hunched over hamburgers and coffee, one so close that his elbow kept touching Clive's. Clive was reading his newspapers all over again and he had propped one against the napkin container in front of him.

One of the men asked for a napkin and disturbed Clive, but Clive smiled and said in a friendly way, 'Did you read about the murders in the waxworks?'

The man looked blank for a moment, then said, 'Yep, saw the headlines.'

'Someone killed the three people who worked in the place. Look.' There was a photograph in one of the papers, but Clive didn't much like it because it showed the corpses lined up on the floor. He would have preferred Mildred in the bathtub.

'Yeah,' said the Westerner, edging away from Clive as if he didn't like him.

'The bodies were put into a few of the exhibits. Like the wax figures. They say that, but they don't show a picture of it,' said Clive.

'Yeah,' said the Westerner, and went on eating.

Clive felt let down and somehow insulted. His face grew a little warm as he stared back at his newspapers. In fact, anger was growing quickly inside him, making his heart go faster, as it always did when he passed MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS, though now the sensation was not at all pleasant.

Clive put on a smile, however, and turned to the man on his left again. 'I mention it, because I did it. That's my work there.' He gestured towards the picture of the corpses.

'Listen, boy,' said the Westerner casually, 'you just keep to yourself tonight. Okay? We ain't botherin' you, so don't you go botherin' us.' He laughed a little, glancing at his companion.

His friend was staring at Clive, but looked away at once when Clive stared back.

This was a double rebuff, and quite enough for Clive. He got out his money and paid for his unfinished food with a dollar bill. He left the change and walked to the sliding-door exit.

'But y'know maybe that guy ain't kiddin'!' Clive heard one of the men say.

Clive turned and said, 'I *ain't* kiddin'!' Then he went out into the night.

Clive slept at a Y.M.C.A. The next day he half expected he would be picked up by a passing cop on the beat, but he wasn't. He got a lift to another town, nearer his hometown. The day's newspapers brought no mention of his name, and no mention of clues. In another café that evening, almost the identical conversation took place between Clive and a couple of fellows his own age. They didn't believe him. It was stupid of them, Clive thought, and he wondered if they were pretending? Or lying?

Clive hitched his way home and headed for the police station. He was curious as to what *they* would say. He imagined what his mother would say after he confessed. Probably the same thing she had said to her friends some-

times, or that she'd said to a policeman when he was sixteen and had stolen a car.

'Clive hasn't been the same since his father went away. I know he needs a man around the house, a man to look up to, imitate, you know. That's what people tell me. Since he was fourteen Clive's been asking me questions like, "Who am I, anyway?" and "Am I a person, mom?" ' Clive could see and hear her in the police station.

'I have an important confession to make,' Clive said to a deskman in the front.

The man's attitude was rude and suspicious, Clive thought, but he was told to walk to an office, where he spoke with a police officer who had grey hair and a fat face. Clive told his story.

'Where do you go to school, Clive?'

'I don't. I'm eighteen.' Clive told him about his job at Simmons's Grocery.

'Clive, you've got troubles, but they're not the ones you're talking about,' said the officer.

Clive had to wait in a room, and nearly an hour later a psychiatrist was brought in. Then his mother. Clive became more and more impatient. They didn't believe him. They were saying his was a typical case of false confession in order to draw attention to himself. His mother's repeated statements like 'Am I a person?' and 'Whom am I?' only seemed to corroborate the opinions of the psychiatrist and the police.

Clive was to report somewhere twice a week for psychiatric therapy.

He fumed. He refused to go back to Simmons's Grocery, but found another delivery job, because he liked having a little money in his pocket, and he was fast on his bicycle and honest with the change.

'You haven't *found* the murderer, have you?' Clive said to the police psychiatrist. 'You're all the biggest bunch of jackasses I've ever seen in my life!'

The psychiatrist said soothingly, 'You'll never get anywhere talking to people like that, boy.'

Clive said, 'Some perfectly ordinary strangers in Indiana

said, "Maybe that guy ain't kidding." They had more sense than *you*!'

The psychiatrist smiled.

Clive smouldered. One thing might have helped prove his story – Woodrow Wilson's necktie, which still hung in his closet. But these dumb clucks damned well didn't deserve to see that tie. Even as he ate his suppers with his mother, went to the movies, and delivered groceries, he was planning. He'd do something more important next time – like starting a fire in depths of a big building or planting a bomb somewhere or taking a machine-gun up to some penthouse and letting 'em have it down on the street. Kill a hundred people at least, or a thousand. They'd have to come up in the building to get him. *Then* they'd know. *Then* they'd treat him like somebody who really existed, like somebody who deserved a wax model of himself in MADAME THIBAULT'S WAXWORK HORRORS.

Something for the Dark

Edward D. Hoch

The monthly editorial sessions were held in the cork-walled conference room at *Neptune Magazine*, and for Steve Foley they were often the most interesting part of the office routine. He hadn't yet been on the *Neptune* editorial staff long enough to be bored by the individual mannerisms of the dozen or so men and women who lounged about the massive oak table, and it was one of the few times during the month when he felt he was actually contributing something towards the finished product on the printed page.

Steve was still under thirty when he'd joined *Neptune* a year earlier. In his position as associate feature editor he was surprised even to be included in the editorial planning sessions, but Mike Eldon, ashen-haired editor-in-chief, was a man who liked to have a full staff around the polished oak table. He'd brought the magazine a long way since the day when it was founded as 'a monthly compendium of fable, fashion and food for those who travel the seven seas.' Today *Neptune* devoted more space to fact than fiction, and most of it was likely to take place on solid ground. If its emphasis was still on 'the adventure of travel', both 'adventure' and 'travel' were interpreted in their broadest meanings.

'People,' Mike Eldon said, hitting the polished surface with

his fist, 'that's what the readers care about, and that's what sells copies. No more stories about some mountain in the Andes. Now we do stories on the people who climb that mountain!'

It was a stock speech, and he repeated it in some form or another at almost every meeting, but no one could deny that it was mainly this philosophy which had helped boost *Neptune*'s lagging circulation from 875,000 to nearly two million in three short years.

'The October issue,' Mike Eldon said, tapping the table with his rubber-tipped pencil. It was still early summer, but in the magazine business you always live in the future. 'Halloween. You know, something for the dark.'

Steve Foley raised a finger. 'I've got a funny one on my desk right now. Came in from an agent. A man and his wife, on a camping trip a few months ago, claim they were attacked by some sort of great winged creature that even carried off their dog.' He'd been about to reject the thing, but now it just might have possibilities.

Eldon frowned down the table at him. 'That's a bit out of *Neptune*'s line. Still, it might be what we're looking for.' He turned to the art director. 'Harry, could you do a full page, in colour, of a winged creature? A *great* winged creature? With red eyes, maybe? Probably something like those old illustrations of the Jabberwock in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Was it a Jabberwock by any chance, Steve?'

'I'm just as sceptical as you are, but do you want something for October or don't you?'

'I want something our readers will *believe* – at least enough to scare them a little.' He sighed and stopped tapping the pencil. 'All right, what the hell! Look into it, Steve. Talk to the people and see if there's any truth at all in it. You've got ten days before we lock up the issue. If it looks good to you, we'll run it. But take a camera along. Get some pictures of where it happened – whatever it was.'

That was how it started.

Steve Foley phoned the agent who had submitted the article, a little Frenchman with a slight accent who worked out of his apartment on Central Park West. 'Pete, this is Steve over at *Neptune*.' Everyone called him Pete, because it was easier than trying to pronounce his real name. 'It's about this flying creature article you sent us, by a fellow named Walter Wangard.'

'Oh, yes.'

'What do you know about him? Any truth to it?'

'I couldn't tell you. He's written a few outdoor items – hunting, fishing, camping. I think I've sold two or three for him. I'm not getting rich on it.'

'Ever met him? Is he a phony?'

'Doesn't seem like it from his letters. He and his wife live in a little town near the Pennsylvania border, not far from where they saw the creature. He's a tyre salesman, but he likes the outdoors.'

'I guess I'll have to go see him,' Steve said.

'You're going to buy it?'

'Probably, if they're not complete nuts. I want to get some pictures too.'

'Want me to go along?' the agent offered.

'Not necessary. Just let them know I'm coming. I'll drive over this weekend, maybe.'

He left early on Saturday morning while the summer heat still smouldered unleashed. He was halfway across New Jersey by ten o'clock, and was pulling into the Wangards' driveway at noon. Their house was a little white frame place in a little white frame town, sleepy in the summer except when the city cars drove through on the way to the lake. There was a church across the street, and a wedding was in progress. Steve stood for a moment watching the clouds of coloured confetti shower down on the squealing bride and happy groom. Some things were the same everywhere, he decided, and lit a cigarette before turning towards the white frame house.

He had time for just a few puffs before he discarded it and pressed the doorbell. The woman who came through the dim

living-room to the latched screen door was younger than he'd expected, with long blonde hair and a good figure. He guessed her to be about his own age, certainly no more than thirty. 'Hello. I'm Steve Foley from *Neptune Magazine*. I believe your husband is expecting me.'

'Oh, yes, Mr. Foley.' He stepped in as she unlatched the door. 'This is quite a treat for us, having an editor drive all the way from New York. I'm Lynn Wangard, Walt's wife.'

As if on cue, her husband appeared, tucking the ends of a clean sport shirt into his pants. He was what Steve might have expected – medium height, running just a bit too overweight and thinnish hair, with a ruddy complexion that reflected the outdoor life in a summertime along the Pennsylvania border. 'Glad to meet you, Mr. Foley,' he said briskly. 'My agent told us to expect you.'

Steve sat down, trying to feel at ease, telling himself that they seemed friendly enough, yet feeling oddly bothered by something. 'We're seriously considering using the account of your experiences in the October issue,' he told them. 'We just wanted to talk to you in person and perhaps get a few pictures out where it happened.'

Lynn Wangard gave a little shiver of anticipation. 'We haven't been back there since. It was the most horrible thing that ever happened to me, in my whole life. It was almost like a dream, a terrible nightmare.'

'Of course I've read your article,' Steve told Wangard, 'but I'd appreciate hearing it from your wife again, just briefly, to refresh my memory a little bit, you see.'

Walt Wangard smiled thinly. 'Or to compare our stories? I assure you they agree.'

'Walt!' She seemed to speak a bit sharply. 'I'd be glad to tell him about it.' Then, turning to Steve, she began. 'Actually, it's a very short story. It was the middle of May, and it was the first time we'd been camping this season. The weather was good – a warm evening with lots of stars – but we'd chosen a camping spot a mile or so away from the main area. We don't have any children, and we're always just as happy off by ourselves, away from the other campers. Besides, our

dog Jake used to bark a lot at night – you know, just baying at the moon like dogs are supposed to do.'

'What kind of dog was he?' Steve asked.

She seemed startled. 'A beagle. Surely that was in Walt's article.'

'I'd forgotten.' He lit another cigarette. 'Sorry I interrupted you.'

'Anyway, we were sitting around the little fire having a few drinks. Jake was off prowling in the underbrush somewhere, and there were the usual night sounds from the woods. I began to feel strange, and so did Walt. It's hard to explain – it was as if we were no longer alone there. All of a sudden the woods were menacing, the trees seemed to take on a life of their own. There was a noise above us, a sort of flapping. I was frightened, but Walt thought it was just an owl.'

'I was the first to see it,' Walt said. 'I can still remember those red eyes, as big as fists.'

'I started to scream,' Lynn Wangard continued. 'I screamed and I screamed. It was a great scaly thing, with wings a good twelve feet across. It came crashing through the trees above us, all red eyes and dripping mouth. It was horrible . . .'

'No chance the other campers were playing some sort of a trick on you?' Steve asked.

'Mr. Foley, it was *alive*! Walt ran for the gun he'd brought along, a single-shot rifle he fooled around with sometimes. He fired once and was reloading when – when Jake ran up barking at the thing.'

'Just where was it then?'

'Above our heads, in the low branches.'

'Your bullet missed him, Mr. Wangard?'

He rubbed his stubbled chin, and thought about it. 'No. No, I just don't think it hurt him. I have another rifle that I use for hunting, but I hadn't brought it that weekend. The single-shot gun is old and the sights are no good on it, but I do think I must have hit him. At that range I couldn't miss.'

'We could almost feel its breath on our faces,' Lynn Wangard went on. 'I don't know just what happened next, but

suddenly Jake stopped barking and – and I guess the creature had him. The thing went away after that, and took Jake along.'

'That's it,' Wangard said. 'That's the way it happened. We drove down the road to warn the other campers, but nobody else saw a thing. The sheriff got out of bed to chase around after it the rest of the night, but he didn't see anything either. We made the newspapers, though; even a paragraph on the last page of *The New York Times*. A week or so later an old widow with a farm near the spot reported that something was bothering her cows. Said they hadn't been giving as much milk lately. Thought it might be they'd been scared by our creature.'

Steve hadn't bothered to take notes, because it had all been in the article. They seemed to be telling the truth, and even if they weren't, that wasn't really his concern. Mike Eldon's only stipulation was that they not be obvious crackpots or fakes. They seemed to be neither one. 'Could I see the place, get some pictures?' he asked.

'We'll drive you over,' Wangard said, getting to his feet. 'It's only about a forty-minute ride from here.'

The wedding party from the church across the street had gone now, leaving only a tired janitor to sweep up the flecks of coloured confetti. Steve sat in the back seat as they drove him down the main street of the town, across jolting railway tracks, and into the rich farmland of the countryside. It took just over a half-hour to reach the state park, a solid rise of timberland that cut through the oatfields and across the horizon like some unexpected curtain. The afternoon warmth had spread itself across the landscape, and here in the park even the Saturday bustle of playing children was muted by the heat. Only at the carefully supervised swimming pool did the noise level give evidence of youthful joy.

'It was out this way,' Lynn told him as they turned off the main pavement on to a well-travelled dirt road. Some campers were in the area now, and they waved as campers will, perhaps expecting someone they knew. Finally Walt Wangard brought the car to a stop and they got out, under

a great old oak that might have been standing in William Penn's day.

'That was the tree.' Wangard pointed up at it. 'The creature came down right about here and snatched up Jake.'

Steve nodded and got out the little German camera he'd brought from the office. He snapped pictures of the tree, and pictures of Walt and Lynn by the tree, then general pictures of the area. The place seemed awfully harmless in the summer sunshine. 'Do you have a photo of the dog that I could have?' he asked.

'I think there's one in our scrapbook – ' Lynn began, and then suddenly choked off her words. Something had happened to her husband.

Walt Wangard had toppled against the tree, his face screwed into a mask of sheer terror. 'No, no!' he muttered clawing at the bark. 'It's coming again, coming . . . ' He screamed.

Steve felt the chill on his spine as he followed Lynn's terrified gaze to the treetops, but there was nothing to be seen. Perhaps they were all crazy. Perhaps the world was crazy. Steve shot one quick picture of the huddled man against the tree and then ran over to help Lynn with him.

'I can't understand it,' she said, truly frightened now. 'He's never been like this before.'

'Let's get him into the car, away from this place.'

Wangard was shivering, almost beside himself with fear, as they half-carried him to the car. Steve sat with him in the back while Lynn turned the vehicle towards home. The day was no longer a sunny summer afternoon. Something cold and dark and unknown had thrust itself upon them.

Steve remained at a nearby motel overnight, and on Sunday morning he phoned Mike Eldon at his home, filling him in quickly on the previous day's events. 'The whole thing might have been an act for my benefit,' he concluded, 'but if it was, he did a damned good job of it.'

'You think they really saw this creature?'

'Who knows? I talked with a few neighbours last night, and they confirmed the story as much as they could. The dog certainly did vanish that night, and it hasn't been seen since.'

Eldon sighed into the phone. 'What about Wangard? How is he?'

'All right. He'd pretty much snapped out of it by the time we got him back to the house. He can't understand what happened to him.'

'You got some pictures?'

'Yes.'

'It doesn't seem that you can do too much there. Might as well come back tonight.'

Steve hesitated and then said, 'I'd like to stay over one more night if the expense account can stand it. There's something strange about the whole business.'

'All right. One more night.'

Steve hung up and strolled out to the street. Townspeople, dressed up for church, hurried past. He watched them, then followed along for a ways until he reached the Wangards' street. Services were just letting out at the little church across from their house, and he waited on the sidelines until a youngish blond minister finished greeting his parishioners.

Steve introduced himself. 'I was wondering about the Wangards' experience,' he said, getting quickly to the point. 'What do people think of it? How has it affected the town?'

The minister looked even younger than Steve, and he spoke with a touch of New England accent that seemed surprising. For a moment, Steve had forgotten that a good many men had followed Franklin's early path from Boston to Philadelphia. 'They're good people,' he told Steve, smiling up at the sun. 'Whatever happened to them, whatever was out there, I believe they told the truth.'

'But what does the town believe?'

The blond minister shrugged. 'The Wangards are dismissed as harmless. The creature in the woods is only another form of flying saucer, after all.'

'And how has this affected them?'

The minister seemed thoughtful. A woman passed and called, 'Good afternoon, Dr. Reynolds!'

'Good afternoon, Sarah.' The smile came automatically to his face, but lingered a bit longer than necessary. He was a pastor who knew his people. Then he answered Steve's question. 'Oddly enough, I believe it has brought them closer together. It's no secret that there was actually some talk of divorce before all this happened.'

'I see,' Steve said. Then, 'What do *you* think it was, Dr. Reynolds? Not a flying saucer, certainly.'

'No.'

'The devil, perhaps?'

The blond minister smiled slightly. 'Perhaps. I would never be one to deny it.'

Steve Foley thanked him and strolled away. The sun was high in a cloudless sky, and he was thinking it would be a good day for a picnic.

He spent the afternoon with the Wangards, lunching on a rough wooden picnic table in the back yard. Walt seemed completely recovered from his seizure of the previous afternoon, and the three of them sat chatting about the town and its people.

'The woman who saw your creature,' Steve said. 'Is she worth talking to?'

'She never really said she saw it,' Lynn said. 'Just that something was bothering her cows. It could have been a small bear. We've had them in the area before.'

'The woman's something of a crackpot,' Walt agreed. 'You'll get nothing you can use out of her.'

Steve nodded. 'Then I guess I'll get back to New York in the morning since my work's about over.'

'You're staying another night?'

'It's a long trip back in the dark. I'd rather start in the morning.'

He left them in the late afternoon, while the sun was still bright in the western sky. Back at the motel, he read over the manuscript from Walter Wangard once more, waiting until the sky began to turn a mottled, midnight blue. Then he got

into the car and drove out to the park, to the camping area where Walter and Lynn Wangard had met their creature.

The place was different by dark, a silent world where only the occasional sounds of the night creatures intruded upon the subdued campers and stray lovers. Steve passed a few parked cars, pulled off the road into the shielding foliage, then found a parking space of his own near the big tree Lynn and Walt had shown him.

He took a flashlight with him when he left the car, but he didn't know exactly what he was seeking. It was just an idea, the beginnings of an idea . . .

Then he heard it, a great whirring of wings from somewhere above. The thing in the tree had been disturbed by his presence. He crouched against the trunk, shooting his flashlight beam into the upper branches.

Something flew down at him, blinded by the light, but swerved away at the final instant, chasing its shadow back into the depth of the forest.

It was an owl – large and probably very old, but still an owl.

Steve relaxed a bit and directed the beam of light towards the ground. He began to walk in an ever-widening circle until he'd gone some thirty feet from the tree, in the direction away from the camp site. Then he dropped to his hands and knees to study the earth. Hard to tell after two or three months, but the soil might have been disturbed, the grass uprooted since its spring growth. Perhaps the breath of the winged creature had scorched it. Or perhaps . . .

Steve started to scoop the earth away with his hands, then went back to the car and brought a tyre iron from the trunk. It took him ten minutes to funnel a hole a foot deep in the hard soil. That was all he needed. He'd found Jake, the missing dog.

He drove back into town then, not to the motel but to the little house across from the church, where Walt and Lynn Wangard lived. The place was in darkness when he reached

it a little before midnight. He had to ring the bell four times before Lynn appeared at the door, her face a frightened mask, pale and distorted in fear.

'Come quickly!' she gasped. 'He's killed himself!'

Steve followed her up the stairs, close on her heels as she snapped on the lights. Finally, at the bathroom door, she flicked the last light switch and stepped aside. Walt Wangard was sitting on the toilet seat with his head and hands in the sink. He was bleeding from both wrists.

'Call an ambulance!' Steve shouted over his shoulder 'There may still be time to save him!'

She ran out and he heard her dialling for help. In a few minutes the rising siren of an approaching ambulance cut through the outer night. When they arrived with a stretcher, Steve had already managed to stop the bleeding from both wrists.

'I'm going with him,' Lynn said. 'In the ambulance.' Her face was a twisted, frightened thing, hardly recognisable.

'Wait,' Steve insisted. 'I'll drive you to the hospital.' His hand was heavy on her shoulder. He stepped on to the front porch and said a few words to the ambulance driver.

She was waiting when he returned to the living-room, lit now only by a single shaded lamp. 'Why wouldn't you let me go? Why?'

'Because we have to talk, Mrs. Wangard. We have to talk about your monstrous winged creature.'

She fumbled for a cigarette. 'My husband's dying, Mr. Foley.'

'Let's hope not.'

She blew out the cigarette smoke, nervous, unsure of herself. 'What do you want me to say?'

'I want the truth. I found the dog tonight, Mrs. Wangard. Where he'd been buried.'

She sighed and stubbed out the cigarette in a sudden motion of resignation. 'All right, all right. There never was a creature. Walt made the whole thing up for the story. He killed the dog and buried it. When you started asking too

many questions he tried to kill himself tonight. Is that what you wanted to hear?'

'No,' Steve said softly. It was almost over now, nearly at an end, and for an instant he wondered what he was doing there, standing in the dimly-lit living-room of this little house and playing God. 'There is a creature, Mrs. Wangard. There was one that night. Your husband saw it.'

'What did you just tell those men who took him to the hospital?' she asked suddenly.

'I told them to pump his stomach,' Steve said. He felt very tired. 'To get out whatever you fed him.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Mrs. Wangard, did you walk into the bathroom, find your husband bleeding to death in the sink, and then *turn the light off* as you left? Is that what you want me to believe?'

'I . . .'

'You've been trying to kill him for two months, and I hope to God you haven't succeeded tonight.'

For an instant he thought she would throw herself at him, perhaps clawing at his eyes with the unleashed fury of some jungle cat, but the moment passed, and the fight seemed to drain away from her face. She sank back on to the sofa and said, very quietly, 'You really believe that?'

'You know a lot about drugs, don't you? Maybe you were a nurse once, or you have a boy-friend who's a doctor. Maybe you just read a lot. That night of the camping weekend you fed him a hallucinogen or psychedelic drug of some sort, didn't you?'

'You're doing the talking, mister.'

'It might have been LSD, but more likely it was DMT – dimethyltryptamine – a more intense form that concentrates and compresses the hallucinations into a half-hour period. He might have done almost anything during that half-hour, even accidentally killed himself. As it was, he saw an owl or some other bird and imagined a great winged beast. You told the same story, and even killed the dog and buried it to back up the tale. The way it worked out was just as good for your plans. He could be killed by the "beast"

at a later date, or a suicide could be arranged. Either way, you'd be in the clear. Of course he wrote the story about his experience, and then you had to wait. You didn't know what might happen, but I suppose you felt that its publication would strengthen your hand. Walt Wangard would be judged either a crazed suicide or the victim of some unknown creature, whichever way you wanted to play it.'

'You figured all that out?'

'I had help. The thought of a drug crossed my mind the first time I read Walt's article. It sounded so much like an LSD-created experience. Even if I were right, though, it could have gone either way – either one of you could have administered the drug to the other, and then simply matched your story to the drug-inspired hallucination. But when Walt had his attack in the park yesterday, I knew. Drugs like LSD and DMT sometimes cause repeat hallucinations days, weeks, or months after the initial effects have worn off. Our visit to that spot triggered just such a reaction in Walt. Later, when I heard you two had been talking about divorce before all this happened, I had a semblance of motive. What was it, money? I suppose you wanted it all, instead of just some alimony.'

She wasn't looking at him. She was staring at the floor. 'You're too late, you know. He's dead.'

'If he is, you're in extra big trouble lady. They'll find the sleeping potion or whatever it was in his stomach. They'll know you knocked him out before propping him up in the bathroom and cutting his wrists. After yesterday in the park, you figured you had to do something fast. The time seemed right for it, while I was on the scene to testify to his mental unbalance.'

Steve had got to his feet, and she asked, 'Where are you going now?'

'To the hospital. To see how he is. Do you want to come?'

She shivered, curling into herself on the couch. 'No. I don't think so.'

He left her there with herself, because he was not a policeman. Someone would come for her later.

As he walked quickly out of the silent house and along the dark street, he saw a queer shape pass across the face of the moon. To some it might have seemed like a great winged creature, but he knew it was only a cloud.

The Grey Shroud

Anthony Horner

Baker's heart sank as he looked out of the window. Visibility was pretty poor already. He could only just see the buildings across the road. He licked his lips nervously.

'I expect the buses will be delayed, won't they?'

The head cashier snorted. 'Delayed? They won't run in this.' He pulled his watch out of his pocket and frowned at it.

'Ten to six. Might as well get along, I suppose. Take me an hour to walk. You'll see to the door, won't you?' He put on his hat and coat. 'Good night, Baker.'

Baker watched his figure recede down the passage and fought back an impulse to rush after him. He lived in the opposite direction. Company as far as the corner would provide scant comfort. After that, Baker would be on his own.

On his own. The three words vibrated through his brain and he fought himself gripping the edge of his desk. As he let go he watched the sweat marks evaporate.

And precious little sympathy he'd get from Miriam. He could picture her irritable expression. 'I suppose you had to wait for it to lift,' she'd say crossly. 'Why, you're like a great baby about fog.'

He wouldn't say anything of course. He never did, these days. Once or twice, just after they were married, he'd tried

to get her to understand. But she had only stared at him.

'Phobias?' she'd said. 'I don't know what you're talking about. Normal, healthy men don't have phobias.'

Baker got up and peered out of the window. If anything, it was thicker than ever. He shivered and reached reluctantly for his coat. He dare not drag it out any longer; the caretaker locked the main door at six-thirty.

Outside, the fog wrapped him in a cocoon of anguish. Within twenty minutes, he was hopelessly lost. As he had known he would be. He stood still and the physical oppression made him cry aloud. He started to run, hands outstretched – a gesture more supplicatory than defensive. He ran awkwardly, head tucked well into his collar. Twice he cannoned into people, the impetus of his loping gait carrying him forward. Then a malignant pillar-box struck at him from the gloom, and he reeled into the gutter.

He had no idea how long it was before he saw the glimmer of light. But the relief when it turned out to be a small pub was overwhelming. He leaned against the bar, gulping brandy and staring at the landlord who sat stolidly reading the evening paper.

The only other customer was a small fusty-looking individual, wearing a tweed cap and steel-rimmed spectacles. Decidedly commonplace – save for the fact that he was idly screwing one of his fingers on and off.

Baker didn't really see him until he'd finished his second brandy. For a moment he stared, eyes bulging. Then the rational explanation swept over him with a surge of relief. A false finger! But how damnably realistic!

He was raising his glass to his mouth when the man slowly started to unscrew each of the other fingers in turn. A false *hand*!

Baker put his glass down on the bar. The man looked up and Baker nodded towards the 'hand'. 'Rather unusual, isn't it?'

The other looked puzzled. 'Unusual? Why?'

'Well, false fingers on a false hand. What's the point of them?'

The man stared at him. Then he turned to look at the landlord who had put down the paper and was listening. 'False?' he repeated, and there was a bewildered note in his voice as he turned back to Baker. 'What do you mean – false?'

But before Baker could give vent to his rising exasperation, the landlord methodically unscrewed his left wrist and laid it on the bar.

Baker stared at the grotesque object, lying there like an inflated glove. The hammering in his brain told him that this could not be happening – that it was a trick – an optical illusion. He groped for sanity, forcing his lips into a smile. But their deliberate scrutiny began to tell on his nerves, and he dashed out of the bar.

Although the fog was as thick as ever, he must have run for nearly a quarter of a mile before his breath gave out. He leant against a wall, panting. The unaccustomed brandy had left a raw taste in his mouth and his head was beginning to ache. He cursed the fog and the chill wind. The oaths triggered off all the strange obscenities that had lain dormant in his mind for years. The sense of isolation lent him courage and he strode along, swearing out loud, until at last, dazed and breathless, he sank on to a seat in a bus shelter.

A thin tremor of normalcy filtered into his body. The fog was lifting – that grey obscurity that had shrouded his whole life. He blinked at the scurries of mist that no longer seemed to exacerbate his every sense. Rising swiftly to his feet, he was appalled to see that it was half past nine. He wouldn't be home before eleven. Miriam would be in bed. She was a firm believer in her eight hours.

The long walk did a lot to clear his head. Even the horror of the public-house assumed a more reasonable shape. A hallucination, perhaps? Some form of self-hypnosis? No matter, it had gone, and with it his lifelong claustrophobia.

He let himself into the silent house. The cold supper looked singularly unattractive and he went upstairs. Undressing swiftly in the dark, he clambered in beside Miriam.

It must have been ten minutes or more before something

penetrated his consciousness. Miriam wasn't snoring. Baker wondered idly whether she had found a cure without telling him. He switched on the light.

For a moment, he gazed at the smooth bareness of his wife's neck without fully taking in the screw-thread where it ended so abruptly. Then, he turned to look at the dressing-table. Her head was there, lying on its side, the curlers still neatly in position.

Baker tried to struggle out of bed as the first wave of hysteria caught him by the throat, and he was still half-laughing, half-screaming, when a merciful blackness enveloped him.

But not before he had glimpsed on the dressing-table, nestling incongruously amongst the pots of foundation-creams and powders, a dainty little oil-can.

The Gentleman Caller

Veronica Parker Johns

Miss Emmy Rice, who didn't look a day over seventy-five, lifted a lid to sniff the fragrance of bubbling beef stew. Beef it really was this time – not scraps conned from a kindly butcher but nuggets of succulent beef bought with twice-counted pennies. The young man, the light of her fast-dimming life, was coming to dinner.

Lowering the gas, she glanced at the turnip watch which had belonged to her father and now hung on the hook of an abandoned birdcage. It was a quarter to six. The guest, Gerald, would appear in fifteen minutes if he continued to indulge his admirable habit of punctuality, which seemed an anachronism in this impolite world. Nightly, for weeks, he had joined her at precisely eight o'clock on the park bench facing the river, since that first evening when the unlikely had happened; then, observing his unease, his need, Miss Emmy had defied convention and struck up a conversation with a member of the opposite sex.

Combing her wispy hair, fluffing it deceptively into a net, she recalled the details of that encounter. It was strange how she could remember almost everything that related to Gerald although frequently she forgot her own name and address and had to consult the paper pinned inside her handbag for

that data. Once, in one of those sudden flashes of lucidity which in the pattern of her vagueness were now the exception, not the rule, she had heard her landlady remark of her that she had lost contact with reality. Indeed, it was quite the contrary. Reality had lost contact with her. Until that night on the bench – how long ago was it, as though time mattered?

She digressed from the sweet recollection of her meeting with Gerald to think spitefully of her landlady. A lot *she* knew, nagging Emmy constantly to part with some of the magazines which crowded the nine by twelve bed- dining-living-room. 'Dust catchers,' Mrs. Martin complained, jabbing at a tottering pile of them with an angry carpet sweeper, 'full of outdated news, which could be news to nobody.' Emmy had primly replied that they were pretty and that was enough to her.

'Pretty!' Mrs. Martin snorted antagonistically. 'I'd like to know what's pretty about *Time* magazine for February five of forty-eight.'

Miss Emmy had not demeaned herself to retort. She chuckled now, content that she had not yielded to pressure, in which event she might have missed the fifty-three issue of *Life* with the picture that looked like Gerald.

It wasn't really Gerald, of course. Gerald's hair was red whereas the man in the photograph was obviously a towhead. Gerald sported a moustache as dashingly as ever was done in the nineties; she was sure it did not conceal a mouth as weak as this other's. Still, there was something about the eyes and the corners of them, the deep cleft chin and the jawline, which had made her tear out the picture and squirrel it away in a bureau drawer.

Spiritually there was no comparison between Gerald and the young man who had achieved national notoriety, who was a thief and an escaped convict. Some time, just for a joke, she would show Gerald the clipping and they would have a good laugh over it, but not tonight. Tonight she wanted everything to be just perfect.

There had been a girl with him that first evening, a flashy,

cheap-looking hussy not worth the apologies he was lavishing upon her. The girl had grumbled about something, her shrill voice fairly drowning out Gerald's placatory murmurings, while Miss Emmy stood tentatively behind the bench which years of occupancy had led her to think of as her own. Before she had decided to assert squatters' rights, the baggage had flounced off, happily never to reappear in that vicinity.

Miss Emmy, then, had spoken to the distraught young man, making a diversionary remark about the number of cars there were on the streets nowadays, had he noticed, and wasn't it a caution? It was an observation she often made, always with an air of well-bred surprise and moderate disapproval because she always *was* surprised to notice that the horseless carriage had entirely taken over.

'I shudder to think,' she murmured, illustrating her reaction with a Delsarte gesture, 'what became of all the horses. They seem to have vanished from the face of the earth.'

'Lady,' he said, not turning towards her, 'it should happen to the nags I bet on.'

Young people talked differently nowadays, she knew, and this was the only thing Gerald had ever said to her which might be considered coarse or common. After that he turned and looked at her, long and silently. He stared at the pink straw hat which obligingly lent itself to an endless routine of retrimming, at the mined-diamond pinky ring, the paired gold bangles, the pince-nez on a thin gold pulley pinned to her crêpe dress.

Gerald's blue eyes were set a little too close together for him to be as handsome as she pretended. Their gaze had grown so intense that for a second or two she regretted the impulse which had led her to speak to him. Then, in some recess of his ordered mind, Gerald pushed a button marked *Charm*. A smile flooded his face.

'I bet you've driven many a spanking pair in your day, ma'am,' he said.

'When I was little,' she told him, 'I used to have a pony.'

She told him lots more, then and later, to which he listened with rapt attention. He was such an audience as she had

believed no longer existed. People, it seemed, did not have the time or simply weren't interested in the things she found absorbing. Gerald's attitude was refreshingly different.

Which was why she had invited him to dinner tonight. No other man had been permitted to enter her tiny home. Mrs. Martin had had fits trying to find a lady electrician when the ceiling light blew out, and there was a cracked pane in the window because of the shortage of female glaziers. Gerald would be the first man ever to put foot in Emmy's room.

It was precisely six when the downstairs bell of the converted brownstone rang sharply. Emmy went to the top of the top flight of steps to welcome her gentleman caller.

Gerald had brought a bottle of port and three sweetheart roses. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she filled a vase from the bathroom which she shared with four other roomers. Meticulously she rinsed dusty wineglasses, her hands trembling with the long-forgotten ecstasy of receiving a gift of posies.

She hurried, an onset of panic nearly convincing her that she had invented the whole thing, that there was no Gerald, that these receptacles were being prepared for wine and flowers that were dust and ashes. Her imagination had played similarly plausible pranks on her only recently.

She had found things in her room the presence of which she could not possibly explain. On the other hand she kept losing things, or thought she kept losing things she had never owned. There had been that frightful row with the woman in the room adjoining hers about a saucepan. Mrs. Martin had meddled in that affair, proving to her own if not Miss Emmy's satisfaction that the pan belonged to the neighbour. There was definitely a new dimension in Miss Emmy's life in which fact and fancy were interchangeable.

It was an area, she was aware, in which she must tread gently, for Mrs. Martin was always ready to pounce upon her. Mrs. Martin had indicated that she could very well do without a tenant who was so unclear about what was and wasn't. One false step, Emmy knew, would send her hurtling into that 'Institution' in which, the landlady often stated behind

a not too carefully cupped hand, she ought to be.

Back in her room she was pleased to discover that Gerald abided in the factual world. He was whistling a waltz as he uncorked the port. She set down the wet glasses and started looking for the dish towel. By the time she had found it, wrapped in crumpled newspaper in a compartment of the desk, he had already done the honours with a clean handkerchief.

'Thank you,' she said humbly. 'I don't know what gets into me. It seems almost as if I take great pains to hide things even from myself.'

She meant objects like the towel, and the nightgown for which she had to hunt an average of fifteen minutes every night, but under the stimulus of Gerald's sympathy she broadened the field to include all those secret things about herself that currently worried her.

'I'm not as sharp as I used to be,' she asserted boldly, glad at last to have said it aloud.

'You're bright as a dollar,' Gerald protested, 'and a grand cook, by the smell of that stew.' With a gallant bow he handed her one of the filled wineglasses, saying, 'Do you know what it means to me, a home-cooked meal?'

'I hope you enjoy it.'

She sipped the port, saying it tasted strong, did he suppose she should? 'I'm not used to it now, although they did say I had quite a head when I was a girl. Did I tell you about that young man wining and dining me at the Hotel Brevoort?'

'No,' Gerald lied. This would make seven times he had heard it.

She had just reached the part about the champagne in the slipper, an apocryphal bit which by now she found wholly convincing, when her eyelids began to droop.

'You must forgive an old lady,' she said breathlessly. 'Just a cat nap. I take them often. Ten minutes or so and I'm fit as a fiddle.'

In an instant she was asleep, bolt upright. Gerald reached for the bottle and poured himself two in quick succession. It wasn't exactly his kind of liquor, but it was better than

nothing. He was hungry and the stew *did* smell good, but that could wait. Waiting was a thing he did well because he had had plenty of practice.

Nevertheless, after a quarter of an hour he grew restless. The straight backed chair on which he sat was uncomfortable. The room was small, like a cell, and seemed to be growing smaller. He got up and twiddled the knob of the early model radio. Sound filled the small room but the old lady slept on He tuned in a rhumba full blast and walked over to her, mockingly pantomiming an invitation to dance. But she did not stir. Maybe she's dead already, he thought, shrugging; just my luck.

She was not. A few minutes later, she awoke with a start.

'My goodness!' she exclaimed, stumbling over to the stove. 'Phew! Why didn't you turn it off. Didn't you smell it?'

'Smell what?'

'Scorching. I smelled it so hard it woke me up. Always did have a keen sense of smell. My eyesight's failing and my hearing's gone off badly, but,' she tapped her highbridged nose, 'my smeller's still a number one. When I was a girl Papa used to say he'd hire me out as one of the bloodhounds in an Uncle Tom troupe. Joking, of course.'

Papa would have been beside himself to hear the reception given his sally by Gerald. Gerald laughed until he sounded as if he were having hysterics and momentarily she expected hammering on the common wall of her neighbour's room.

She managed to salvage enough of the stew, which was delicious. After dinner they went out and sat on their bench for a while and watched the boats go up and down the river.

He didn't mention the will until the third visit.

She'd served meat loaf that night, counter scraps eked out with bread crumbs. She knew she was overspending, but she didn't give it too much thought. Chiefly what she thought was that few people get a chance to live more than once – that very few elderly ladies, their friends gone on before them, ever found a whole new life on a riverside bench.

He called her 'Aunty' by now; he had appointed himself her favourite nephew. 'I want to talk to you about something,' he announced after the dinner dishes had been washed and put away. 'It's rather a touchy subject. I don't want to hurt your feelings.'

'You're not going away?' she asked, panicky, that being the worst thing she could think of.

'No,' he said soberly. 'It's not me. It's you. You'll be going away some day, maybe sooner than we think.'

'Me?' She chuckled. 'I never go anywhere.'

'I'm referring,' there was tremolo in his voice, 'to that last, long journey.'

His mien was so funereal that she could not miss the point.

Comfortingly she told him that she would be ready when the call came to join her family and friends Beyond.

'That's not what I'm getting at,' he said. 'Look, I guess the best way to say this is just to say it right out. I've been reading a book about wills. Have you made one?'

'No, I haven't. I didn't think I had enough to bother.'

'You have plenty of nice things,' he contradicted, fingering a chipped Meissen shepherdess. 'You have your treasures. You want to make sure, don't you, the right people get them afterwards?'

She saw the wisdom of this. She supposed that if she left no specific instructions Mrs. Martin would simply come in and pirate everything.

Gerald hung the smile on his face. 'Don't go thinking your favourite nephew is only fixing it so he will inherit your fortune,' he teased.

'Fortune?' she echoed, bewildered. 'I'm sure I've got no fortune. Papa lost almost everything and Mama's last illness ate up the rest.'

'Don't kid me.' There was dust from the shepherdess on the finger with which he stroked her cheek. 'Until I came into your life you were what the newspapers call a "recluse". Recluses always have millions in banknotes stashed away between the pages of old magazines. It's expected.'

'Not me,' she insisted. 'All I have is a few little shares of

Consolidated Gas and American Telephone. They're very nice to me, the companies. They send me money every now and again. It's what I live on.

'Sometimes,' she added shyly, 'they send me an envelope and I think it's money but it turns out to be some kind of paper to sign, a p-r-o-x-y, something I don't understand. The next thing I don't understand, will you explain to me?'

'Sure thing, Aunty, glad to oblige. But about a will, that stock is something you should say who gets it.'

'There isn't anyone,' she mused. 'No one I can remember seeing for a long, long time.'

The tremolo came back to Gerald's voice: 'When the angels gather you to them I'd like to have a momentum of our happy hours together. That watch, for instance. Boy, that's a beaut!'

Momentum, she thought. Momentum. It sounded queer, and somehow wrong. Words did that nowadays – they stood on their heads and did not seem to mean what they used to.

Gerald removed the watch from the birdcage hook, whistled at it appreciatively.

'It was Papa's,' she told him. 'I'll write your name on the back of it. I do that. I'll show you.'

She darted about the room, exhibiting tiny scraps of adhesive on which she had written names, stuck to the backs of pictures and the bases of bric-à-brac.

Gerald wasn't sure the bits of adhesive would have any legal value.

'But lawyers cost money,' she protested. 'I couldn't afford one.'

'It so happens you don't need one. I read this here book about wills very carefully, and I took the liberty of drawing you up a proper one. It's simple. I'll go over it with you, and if it's O.K. you can sign it in front of a couple of witnesses. Think we could dig up some people here in the house?'

'Mrs. Martin usually has a few friends over. I could go downstairs with you when you leave. It's good of you to do this. Since Papa's been gone there hasn't been a man around to take care of my affairs.'

'A pleasure,' he assured her.

He drew a single typed sheet from his pocket, unfolded it, and began to read: ' "I give, devise, and bequeath all my property, whether real, personal, or mixed wheresoever located to," ' he raised his head, 'what's the name of your church?'

'My church? I've got it here somewhere. I go every Sunday, at least I used to.' She rummaged through the desk, came up with a dog-eared Gift Offering envelope which she handed to him. Gerald copied the name in ink in a space he had reserved.

'Paragraph Two,' he intoned. 'There are only two, and this one I'll mostly have to fill in, subject to your approval.'

He leaned closer to the lamp and started reading again:

' "The sole exception to the foregoing is that I give, devise, and bequeath to my dear friend, Gerald Musgrove, the following." '

He began to scrawl on a piece of scrap paper, dictating the words aloud to himself: ' "the solid gold watch which belonged to Papa. Also," ' he glanced at her, grinning mischievously, the corners of his eyes crinkled with stifled laughter, ' "also all the cash money found within my room, whatsoever sum that may be." '

'Oh, go 'long with you!' She giggled, pushing his shoulder affectionately. 'You're such a josher. I told you there's nothing.'

He allowed his laughter to break free and she joined in with him, saying as she dabbed at her streaming eyes that he ought to take more, that he really should have the stock because he would know what to do with the papers the companies sent out. He wasn't too well off, she could tell, although he brought her flowers and wine and that pint of vanilla ice cream last night. He really and truly ought not to be so unselfish.

'Honestly, Aunty,' he argued. 'The watch and the money is all I want. And I don't really want that, not for a long, long while. I'd much rather have my sweet little aunty among the living.'

She dozed off as he carefully copied his notes on the original document. When she awoke they went downstairs together. Mrs. Martin had a parlourful of guests who watched Miss Emmy flourishingly sign her last will and testament. Then Mrs. Martin and that dyed blonde from across the street with whom she was so chummy affixed their signatures as witnesses.

As she passed the parlour door again, after bidding Gerald good night, she could hear them cackling in there and she thought she knew the source of the merriment. They must think she was giving herself unholy airs, making a will when she was churchmouse poor.

They couldn't know she had something they'd give their wordly goods to get: a touch of magic. Brothers and sisters she had none, but miraculously she had sprouted a nephew who now looked after her.

When she woke up the next morning it was to the frightening suspicion that she was in for an illness. She'd never had a sick day in her life, never an ache or a pain, yet she felt dizzy and headachy and not up to snuff at all.

There was a funny smell in the room, one she couldn't seem to place. The window was closed, although she couldn't imagine why she had shut it last night. She tottered over to it. As she threw it open, the cracked pane with its gaping hole rattled menacingly. She wondered if Gerald were handy enough about the house to fix it. Papa used to be able to do things like that. She must remember to call Gerald's attention to it and ask him.

As she dressed she decided to give Mrs. Martin one last chance to find a glazier and save Gerald the trouble. On her way out to market she stopped at the parlour door and had already started to knock when she heard the landlady on the telephone.

'Honest to Pete,' she was saying. 'I'd sell the house like a shot if I could find a buyer. Furniture and all. The real estate man's already got the papers drawn up.'

She must have met attempted dissuasion at the other end of the line, for she listened a moment before resuming:

'I know I get a pretty penny in rentals and the janitor does all the heavy work, except Miss Emmy's room which she used to be so fussy about letting a man into, but it's getting on my nerves. Especially with these plainclothes cops hanging around watching. Won't tell me *what* they're watching for, but it's plain that one of the tenants is up to no good.

'I suspect it's that pretty second-floor parlour front. I've always thought she had entirely too many uncles visiting her all the time. If you ask me, that girl is uncled to death. But she pays in advance, and I've looked the other way. Now I don't know –'

There was another long pause. Miss Emmy raised a hand again to knock, then realised she had forgotten what she wanted to ask. All she could think of was how wonderful it would be if Mrs. Martin did sell the house and someone really nice replaced her as landlady.

She kept returning to that dream throughout the day. Anyone, she felt sure, would be an improvement on the incumbent, yet she tried casting this and that person she knew in the role, mentally auditioning them. By late afternoon she was convinced that the delightful possibility was a *fait accompli*, warranting some special sort of celebration.

She dressed herself elegantly, pinning a lavender bow in her hair. From the bureau drawer she took the picture that looked like Gerald. One of the boxes under the bed contained a number of broken picture frames, one of which did nicely. In its split corner she tucked a bouquet of artificial daisies. It looked very pretty on the mantel.

That evening Gerald was punctual but not alone. With him was the baggage Emmy had not seen since the first evening. Emmy almost wept with disappointment.

'I thought you wouldn't mind,' he said nonchalantly, and she wondered how he could possibly have been so in error. 'I brought my Cousin Mildred along. She's heard me rave about you and she's anxious to meet you.'

The girl stepped into the room, although with wholly

pseudo-daintiness she seemed to hold herself apart from it. Her plucked eyebrows rose critically as she looked about. The snapping eyes lit upon the picture on the mantel and suddenly her voluptuous mouth tautened.

'What's that doing there?'

'Nothing,' said Emmy truthfully. 'I just thought it looked like Gerald.'

'Well, it doesn't a bit,' said Mildred. 'Get rid of it.'

Emmy blinked back the tears so as not to give the girl the satisfaction. She had never been spoken to in such a tone. She had done nothing. She had behaved, as always, like a perfect lady.

Mildred repeated the command, 'Get rid of it!'

'Mildred, dear!' Gerald was once more placatory. With a creature like that, Miss Emmy supposed, it was the only tack to take if one wanted to remain friendly cousins. 'It doesn't matter. Let it be.'

'Okay,' contemptuously. 'It's no skin off my – '

'Darling, don't!' He turned to their hostess. 'Is dinner nearly ready?' he asked. 'I'm starving. Don't worry about is there enough for Mildred. She eats like a bird.'

Fortunately there was enough. Emmy's appetite was uncustomarily pawky. With the girl there the vibrations in the room were all wrong, and no amount of effort on Gerald's part could bring them into tune. The washing up, usually a happy affair with one assistant, became an unwieldy manoeuvre with two, and Emmy was worn out by the whole dismal business when she returned to her rocking chair beside the window.

'Don't she remind you of Whistler's mother?' Gerald cooed dotingly.

'Sure,' said Mildred. 'Real quaint.'

Miss Emmy promptly went to sleep.

The room was dusky when she awoke, lit only by the small bulb in the kitchen unit. Mildred had her hand inside the stove. Gerald yanked it out of there, twisting the wrist a little

so that she dropped the screwdriver, or whatever it was she'd been holding.

'Don't be such a milktoast,' Mildred squeaked. 'Suppose she *has* got the keenest nose in town. If we turn it so little every night it'll be weeks before – Wouldn't it be better just to open the burners all the way just before we leave?'

'She'd smell it,' Gerald said. 'She'd turn it off, and then where would you be?'

'All right, then – let her get used to it gradual. Turn the control valve a little at a time, but does it have to be *this* little?'

Mildred's voice had risen. 'Shut up, kid,' Gerald implored, glancing towards the chair. 'You'll wake her up.'

Miss Emmy pretended she was still asleep, to spare him the embarrassment of knowing she had witnessed his cousin's inexcusable behaviour. Not having been born yesterday she knew what the wretched girl was up to, and she knew now what the funny smell in the room was, the intensification of which had just awakened her.

This hateful young person was wasting the gas just to run up the bill. True, the smell had been in the room before Mildred entered it, but there was probably some mechanical reason for that which was beyond Emmy's power to figure out.

Gerald was trying to make her stop. She was glad to see him showing some backbone, but she did not propose to let him carry the burden alone. She had stock in the Gas Company. They wouldn't approve of someone who wasted their commodity. Yes, she would tell them what was going on, and she would let Mildred know she was on to her shenanigans.

As a prelude Emmy yawned extravagantly.

'I think I'll just go downtown tomorrow and pay a visit to the Company,' she said pointedly. 'I haven't been there for a long time. It's way far down somewhere.' She waved an arm. 'It'll take all morning, but I'll find it, you can be sure.'

'That's right, Aunty,' said Gerald, coming over to her. 'Go ahead and live it up a little.'

Miss Perkins, who had not even been born 'way back when the Consolidated Edison Company was known as Consolidated Gas, took her job with it most conscientiously. Every day provided fresh problems, but she had rarely had one so provocative as the one now being presented by the little old lady who sat at her desk.

Miss Emma T. Rice, owner of ten shares of Consolidated Gas, was either nutty as a fruitcake or terribly careless in her choice of friends, one of whom seemed to be trying to murder her by slow leak. It wasn't the Gas Company's baby, but someone had to look into it, the police or the Department of Welfare. Miss Perkins would not sleep a wink until she was sure that another person's bedroom wasn't filling with gas, barely perceptibly, until enough had accumulated to cause death. If the story were an hallucination, then the poor darling needed help of another sort.

'I'll take care of it,' Miss Perkins promised, cutting short the third reprise.

'Pray do.' Emmy shivered in her black going-downtown coat which was too warm for the day but too sleazy for the air-conditioned office. 'We must stop this thievery, this wilful waste of something that belongs to the Company and to me. It isn't Mildred's to throw away that way.'

'It certainly is not,' agreed Miss Perkins as she reached for a telephone.

It was a long trip home and when Emmy got there all she wanted was to crawl upstairs and lie down for a few minutes. But as luck would have it, Mrs. Martin intercepted her in the downstairs hall.

'Your niece was here this morning,' she said. 'I let her use my key to get into your room.'

Emmy was in no mood to stand there and talk such nonsense. It just went to show how much Mrs. Martin knew. Miss Emmy had no niece.

Without bothering to answer she started up the steps.

'You've forgotten to pay your rent again,' Mrs. Martin

nagged after her. 'You've skipped a week. I'd appreciate your giving me this week's and next's at your earliest convenience.'

Emmy marched resolutely upward. Although her pillow looked inviting she was determined to gather the rent money before resting.

This was never a simple operation. To outwit pilferers she banked her small funds in various corners of the room, in an assortment of envelopes and old bread wrappers, or she tucked them between the pages of magazines or into the top of the sugar bowl.

Her method of making withdrawals was to search thoroughly, find all she could, spread it on the bed, count it, and then subtract the amount needed for the rent or whatever else had to be paid. Today she was astonished to discover that she had much more than usual, a great deal more than last time. In fact, the excess was so striking she was half inclined to think that someone, unknown to her, had been taking advantage of the excellent hiding places her room afforded. Miss Saucepan, perhaps, or Miss Bang-on-the-wall, the annoying neighbour.

But if anyone on the top floor might be presumed to be wealthy it was far most likely to be Miss Emmy. She came of a much older family, and it might very well be that she had always had this much money and had simply forgotten it. Certainly she would not mention her doubts to anyone lest she receive that suspicious glance, that tacit implication that Miss Emmy was slightly tibble-dotty and maybe ought to be put away somewhere.

But Gerald, that dear boy – he had *known*. He'd said she had a fortune. He had called her a recluse, a type which *ipso facto* has a roomful of banknotes. And, bless him, here they were. How exciting that Gerald should be so right, when she could have sworn . . .

After a while she went downstairs with the money.

It was so late when she returned that there was barely time to prepare Gerald's dinner, much less stretch out and relax.

But the day which had been so unlike the average still had another surprise for her.

A strange man was waiting for her in the upstairs hall.

'Where the heck have you been, lady?' he asked irritably.

She was conscience-stricken. This must be the man from the Gas Company. She had asked them to send someone, then had not been here to receive him.

'I had to go out again,' she apologised. 'Something unexpected came up and I had to attend to it right away.'

She opened the door, waving him towards the best chair by way of mollification. Then it occurred to her that his first interest was undoubtedly the stove, so she waved him towards that.

The man obeyed neither signal. He walked to the mantel and stood with arms akimbo before the picture which was not of Gerald.

'Some character!' he remarked.

'You know him?' she asked delightedly. 'He resembles a gentleman friend of mine who will be here any minute. If you're still here you can tell me if they really do look alike. That Mildred,' she uttered the name with fastidious distaste, 'doesn't seem to think that they do.'

'Neither did the lieutenant,' the man said cryptically. 'Mind if I open the window? The smell of gas in here is fierce.'

He didn't wait for a reply. 'You're lucky that pane's broken,' he observed. 'Yes, our friend had us guessing. He's grown that moustache, dyed his hair, and taken off a good deal of weight. The boss is a bug about false arrest, and he just wasn't sure.

'What stumps him is – here's a big-time crook. After he gets out he should live like a king, but our boy clerks in a grocery store and lives in a crummy fleabag. His girl's got runs in her stockings, though she looks like the kind that likes nice things when she can get them.

'We keep a tail on him for weeks, hoping to catch him spending more than he can reasonably explain having, but he doesn't step out of line once. He acts like a law-abiding citi-

zen. He doesn't even spit on the sidewalk. And he not only helps old ladies across the street but escorts them upstairs. Then you give us the break we need, by going to Con Edison.

'This patrolman is sent over to check on your story. I'm standing around outside, like always, and I walk up to him to break the monotony, to find out what else is cooking in the house. When he tells me, I go right over and get a warrant for attempted homicide.'

'That's nice,' she said vaguely. 'I'm sure you deserve it.' He frowned at her, then shook his head.

'I decide to make the pinch here,' he continued, 'so's you could identify him without having to go to the station. I've got a grandma myself. We won't have to bother you any more, ma'am, soon's we get his prints. We'll make it as painless on you as possible. Is that okay?'

How the man did chatter on, Emmy thought, saying anxiously, 'I'm afraid I haven't been listening. I guess my mind's on the dinner I should be preparing. My guest will be here any minute. Isn't there something you want to do to the stove?'

He had a nice smile. 'I'll wait,' he said courteously. 'It'll be a pleasure to meet him.'

Miss Emmy began to peel potatoes. The man from the Gas Company rocked contentedly in the chair by the window.

Gerald was his usual punctual self. She went to the door to greet him, her heart springing as always at the sight of him. He scowled when he saw the man in the rocker and turned away as though about to leave in anger. Was he jealous? she wondered, almost unbearably flattered. But he couldn't have left just then even if he had wanted to, because two men were coming up the stairs abreast, cutting off his path.

'Is this the man?' the visitor in the rocker demanded. 'Is this the one you heard talking over by the stove last night, ma'am, planning a little surprise party for you?'

'Yes,' she said proudly. 'This is Gerald.'

There was something metallic in the gasman's hand – a tool for fixing the stove, she supposed. But she was wrong,

because suddenly the thing was snapped about Gerald's wrist.

'Take him away, boys,' he told the others.

And then, in spite of all the confusion, she understood. The Gas Company was going to punish Gerald for something that wasn't his fault at all, was wholly Mildred's. And Emmy herself was to blame for their learning about it in the first place. She wished there were some way she could make amends.

Perhaps there was. 'Could I speak to you privately?' she asked the gasman, drawing him deeper into the room, although the others had already reached the lower landing. She had no wish to embarrass Gerald further.

'I found today I had quite a bit more money tucked away here than I'd thought,' she broached the subject delicately. 'It might help him.'

She unsnapped her handbag, which was capacious but quite inadequate to restrain its contents; the bills burst forth like feathers from a ruptured pillow.

'Great jumping wheels of fire,' said the gasman, and he began counting.

She kept asking him if there was enough to buy Gerald's freedom, but he paid no attention to her. He just shook his head and whistled as if he had never seen that much money before.

At last he found his tongue. 'It's practically the whole payroll from that factory stick-up,' he exclaimed. 'The job our boy did time for. All that's missing is a measly few hundred.'

'You need a few hundred more?' she asked, panicky. 'I'm afraid I haven't got it.'

'You will have – and lots more,' he said, patting her shoulder. 'There's a ten thousand dollar reward for recovering this loot, ma'am. And it's all yours.'

'Oh, dear,' she said, trying to keep all these figures straight. 'But if you need more, that ten thousand won't help Gerald. I've already spent that much today. You see, I bought this house right out from under Mrs. Martin. I know the real estate man won't give me back any of the money.'

She dabbed at her teary eyes and sniffed disconsolately.

'Poor Gerald,' she sighed. 'Such a good boy, and I can't do a thing for him. Well, anyhow,' she brightened, 'some day he'll have Papa's watch to remember me by.'

The Coconut Trial

Don Knowlton

When you're sitting at a bar – well, I don't know, but it's a queer thing – people talk with you. Rather, I should say, they talk *at* you. They say things they'd never tell their wives or their bosses or anybody else. People, I mean, you don't know, you've never seen before and you'll never see again. I think the anonymity of the situation has something to do with it.

Anyhow, there I was, in a bar on lower Broadway. It was a seedy bistro. There were all sorts of old stickers and placards on the walls, and the bartender looked as if he hadn't shaved in a week. Why was I there? Well, why was the young man on my left there? We were both getting quietly and steadily drunk. I guess there is no accounting for human behaviour.

Well, this boy on my left – I call him a boy, but he was bigger than I am – this boy had volunteered the information that he was in the Navy, and currently on leave. He was a good-looking kid, and all of a sudden he began to talk. I realised afterward that what he told me must have been on his mind for a long time, but he probably hadn't dared tell it to his shipmates or to his folks back home; not just because they wouldn't believe it, but because it made them look silly. The reason he got into the mess, that is.

'You see,' he began, 'there we were on the destroyer, an-

chored about a mile off that island. They were playing war games and we were supposed to meet up with a tanker at that exact spot on that exact date, only something got fouled up and the tanker didn't get there. We learned all about it, of course, by radio, and we were told to stay right where we were; the tanker would show up the next day.

Now that island was something. It was just a volcano. Not a big one, but a perfect one, like you see sometimes on Japanese screens. And there were little wisps of smoke coming out of the top of it.

'Around the edges of the island, along the sea, there were a few stretches of level land, and one of them stuck way out into the ocean. It was just a big finger of sand. Well, on that finger there was growing a row of coconut palms. They stood out against the horizon like evenly spaced sentinels.

'Well, I'd been brought up in Connecticut, and until that moment I'd never even *seen* a palm tree, much less a coconut palm. And I wanted to get close enough to take a good look. Oh, I suppose it sounds funny, but put it the other way round. Suppose a native of New Guinea saw snow for the first time; I'll bet he'd want to get near enough so he could actually feel it with his hands.

'Anyhow, Bill Scott and I got permission to take a dinghy and row over to that line of coconut palms.

'We anchored the dinghy instead of pulling it part-way on to the beach, because we weren't sure about the tides. And then we went to look at those trees. Of course, that sort of thing may be old hat to you; but I tell you, I got a big kick out of those trunks that just went up and up without a single branch, with a big tuft of palm leaves on the very top and a cluster of nuts hanging just beneath them.

'There was one coconut on the ground, and I picked it up. Bill thought maybe he could knock another down with a stone, and he was looking around for a rock the right size when all of a sudden we were surrounded. In no time at all about twenty men had made a circle around us. Some had guns, some had spears, and some had knives. And they were all pointed at *us*.'

The boy stopped talking for a moment, and sipped reflectively at his bourbon and water.

'Well!' he said. 'The surprise was that there were men there at all. Because we'd assumed, all of us on the destroyer, that the island, with that live volcano on it, was uninhabited.

'What kind of men? Thinking about it afterwards, I'd say they were a mixture from 'way back – so far back that now they all looked pretty much alike. There was some Polynesian there, and some Negro, and some Malayan, and a tinge of Japanese, and at some time there must have been a white man in somebody's family tree.

'They weren't big men. They were brown, they didn't wear any clothes to speak of, and they obviously meant business. They jabbered in their own tongue, whatever it was, which of course we couldn't understand a word of, but we *could* understand what they wanted – which was for us to get going along a trail that led to the interior of the island. Which we did.

'After going through a sort of tunnel under big trees we came out to a little clearing. I wouldn't have thought there was that much land between the base of the volcano and the ocean, but there was. In the middle of that clearing there was a – well, I wouldn't call it a house exactly. I would hardly call it a shack, because part of it didn't have any walls, but it *did* have a roof, and it *did* have a porch. I could see women moving around in the back of the place but what struck us was the man who was sitting on the porch.

'He was a white man, though much tanned, of course; and he was old. His hair was snow-white. He must have once had a powerful build; but now his shoulders had shrunk and he had a paunch. But it was his face that held us. His brow was clear; but the lines on his cheeks were so deep that he looked – well, perhaps ravaged is the word. As if he had been driven by something or had suffered from something.

'Well, he got up from his chair and he listened patiently while all those natives chattered at him like monkeys and made threatening gestures at us. He answered them in their own language. Then he turned to us and he said – I'll try to

remember his exact words – he said, "You are charged with trespassing and stealing. These are serious offences. You will therefore be subjected to a trial, which will be held immediately. I shall be the presiding judge, and I shall also act as interpreter for both sides."

'With that he started up a little hill, with everybody following. He took us into a little open place in the forest, and there, believe it or not, was a big high chair. To its right, facing it, were two benches; and to its left, facing it, were two low chairs.

'The judge took the high chair and indicated that we were to sit in the two low ones. Then he motioned towards the benches, and twelve of the natives sat down there, six on each bench. All this time we had been talking our heads off, explaining how and why we had come to the island, but the judge paid not the slightest attention, so far as we could tell; and no wonder, because it sounded perfectly silly. And would those natives believe that two men had come ashore just to look at a coconut tree? When *they* had *lived* with and under coconut trees all their lives?'

'Did the judge tell you anything before the trial started?' I asked.

'He certainly did. He put himself down in that big chair with all the dignity in the world, and then he made us a speech. He said, "You will be tried, in accordance with the rules of common law, by a jury of your peers. You may not consider them such, but on the basis of my past experience with the human race I can assure you they are. I have appointed counsel for the prosecution, and counsel for the defence. Before the trial begins I shall translate your explanation, as you gave it to me on the way up here, to both of them. After they have made their respective pleas I shall instruct the jury, who will then retire to arrive at their verdict."

'So the trial began. Counsel for the prosecution turned out to be one of the most bloodthirsty villains I have ever seen in my life. He did not speak long, but he spoke violently; and we could see some of the jurors nodding their heads. When

he had finished, the judge turned to us.

'"For your benefit," he said, "I shall give you the substance of the case for the prosecution. Trespassing is not allowed on this island; and stealing is a capital crime. The prosecution accuses you of both, since, when you were apprehended, one of you had a coconut in his hand and the other was about to knock one off a tree. The prosecutor asks for the death penalty. This, I might add, is usually carried out on this island by burning at the stake, since the natives prefer roasted meat to boiled. I might also mention that the prosecutor bases his case on a sound premise – that ignorance of the law is no excuse."'

'My God!' I exclaimed. 'Didn't you have the guts scared out of you?'

'Of course we did! But then counsel for the defence got up. He was a little chap, with a sort of wily, persuasive voice. Besides trying to make a case, I suspect that he even contrived to get into his appeal something about the quality of mercy. Anyhow, when he got through the judge again turned to us.

'"Your counsel," he explained, "has hit upon a most ingenious defence. He admits the trespassing; he admits your intent to steal the coconuts. But, he says, you assumed that the island was uninhabited – and how could anyone trespass on an island owned or occupied by nobody? As to ignorance of the law being no defence, there again he admits the correctness of the concept. But, he says, since you thought there was nobody on the island, you naturally assumed that there were no laws of which to be ignorant. And finally he mentioned – just casually, you understand – that the ship from which you had come is a warship of the United States of America . . . I shall now charge the jury."

'Which he proceeded to do. What he told them I don't know – he didn't translate that for us. Then he sat down and the jury solemnly filed back behind a group of palms and went into a huddle. After about ten minutes they came back and sat down again on the benches.

'There was an exchange between the judge and one of the

jurymen, which I assume was: Have you reached a verdict? Yes, we have. What is your verdict? – and then the verdict was pronounced. And *that* the judge did translate for us.

'"The verdict," he declared, "is *not* guilty. Gentlemen, I congratulate you."

'And then he walked down the path with us, back to our boat. It was lucky we had anchored it, because the tide had changed and it was now about fifty yards offshore. We would have to swim for it.

'It was just as we were about to plunge into the water – *not*, by the way, taking a coconut with us – that Bill Scott couldn't contain himself any longer.

'"Say," he said to the judge, "Who are you, anyhow? And why and how did you ever come to this island?"'

The lined face of the old judge took on a look that was positively terrifying.

'"Why and how I came here," he said, "is something I shall never tell a living soul. As to who I am – or rather, I should say, who I *was* –"

'And suddenly his face softened.

'"Well, boys," he said, "I will give you just one clue. I trust you have noticed that this is a *volcanic* island."

'And with that he turned back up the path, and we swam to our dinghy.

'Next morning the tanker caught up with us, and we refuelled, and were on our way again. But do you know, it took me a whole day before I caught on as to who that fellow was?'

'What fellow?' I asked.

'Why, the judge! The last thing he said was that it was a volcanic island. That did it.'

'Well, who was he?'

'Judge Crater, of course.'

Man in a Trap

John D. MacDonald

When Joe Conroy walked from the supermarket to his parked car with the bag of groceries on a late Saturday afternoon, he looked at the black sky in the west and hoped the rain would hold off until he could get the grass cut. He was a gangling, freckled man, part owner and manager of a small and profitable trucking line. He put the groceries in the back on the floor and got behind the wheel.

As he looked back over his left shoulder, preparing to back out, the car door on the other side opened. He turned his head in time to see a big man step into the car quickly and pull the door shut.

The man was blond and in his twenties. His forehead and nose were peeling from recent sunburn. His features were heavy and brutal. He wore jeans, a pale blue sports shirt, and a cheap-looking dark blue corduroy jacket. He held a small automatic pistol in his right hand. He held it low, with the barrel aimed at Joe Conroy's waist. He brought a whisky smell into the car, and a smell of perspiration.

'What do you want?' Joe asked, and was pleased because his voice sounded a lot more calm than he felt.

The man moved closer and suddenly slapped the barrel against the point of Joe's knee. It hurt.

'Hey!'

'This real, ole buddy. You just drive. Go west on Oak and turn north at the boulevard light. Take it nice and easy and careful. I'm a nervous man today.'

'You can get in a lot of –'

'No talk. Drive.'

Joe did as he was told. He had long since decided he was not the hero type. When they said hands up, Joe's hands would go up. When they said turn around, he'd turn around. A big dead hero would be no help to Marty and the kids.

There was a curiously unreal flavour about the situation. It was something you knew could happen. But it never did. Until right now. Bang on the brakes and bust his head against the windshield. Sure. And if you lived maybe they'd let you keep the slugs they took out of you. On the mantel, mounted in plastic.

'How far?'

The gun barrel hit him on the knee again. 'Just drive, dad.' The blond man was as tensely alert as an animal.

Joe saw where he had made a mistake when he had dreamed up such an incident. You imagined the criminal would be somebody you could reason with. This man was big, ugly, irrational, and unpredictable.

Ten miles north of the city he said, 'Turn in up there on the right. That Sundown Motel.' After Joe had turned in, he said, 'Now all the way to the end. Park on the far side of that Ford. Take the keys out and put them in my little hot hand. Okay. Now pick up your groceries. Use both hands. Now walk ahead of me right to that door. Number 20. Good. Now stand still. And don't try any funny stuff.'

He rapped on the door, five sharp raps, closely spaced.

'Ray?' It was a woman's voice.

'Open up.'

The door opened inward. Ray prodded him at the base of the spine with the gun barrel. 'Go on in.'

The woman backed away from the door, staring at Joe Conroy with surprise and, he thought, alarm. She was a lean-faced, full-mouthed blonde with a short hairdo. She wore a

white blouse, and dark-red, shiny bullfighter pants. She was barefoot, and her ankles looked soiled. She had a very slim waist, long, heavy legs.

A man bounded off one of the beds and pushed the woman out of the way roughly. Ray had kicked the door shut. The man was about the same age as Ray. He had glossy black hair worn full and long, and sideburns down to the corners of a narrow jaw. He was in blue and white plaid underwear shorts. There was a half crescent of lipstick on his chin. His chest was hairless. His arms were long and powerful.

'Is there anything you can't foul up?' he demanded of Ray. 'Just one lousy little thing?'

'Get off my back, Diz. I figured it all out.'

'You're a big brain now, already.'

'Look, Diz. I found a couple I could have took easy, so what happens? The car gets listed as hot maybe ten minutes later, and every prowl in town has it on the list and with the luck we've been running, they grab us off. So I figure this way. Take the car and the driver too. See? That means it isn't reported stole. Isn't that using the old head?'

Diz gave Ray a look of intense disgust. 'That's using the old head,' he said. He sat down on the bed, heavily, reached the bottle on the night stand and splashed whisky into a glass.

'So what's the matter?' Ray demanded, looking from the girl to the man.

'Tell him, Lauralee,' Diz said.

'This is the matter, lambie pie. Suppose it doesn't go real, real smooth. Suppose somebody has to go bang-bang. Then your new friend has a long talk with the fuzz. Descriptions, stupid.'

Ray turned and stared indignantly at Joe Conroy. After a time his expression cleared. 'So okay, then. Who's stupid? If the deal goes sour, then it don't make any difference we kill this one, too, does it?'

'If it's any help to you . . .' Joe said.

'Shut up!' Diz said. 'Throw me his wallet, stupid.'

'You stop climbing on my back,' Ray grumbled. He took Joe's wallet out of his hip pocket and threw it to Diz.

Diz looked in it. 'You're up to par, Ray. Four bucks.' He took the identification cards out, and the photographs Joe carried. 'Joseph T. Conroy,' he said. 'Hello, Joe. Wife and kids. And about two hours from now the wife gets so itchy she calls the cops. What the hell is the car? A thirty-seven jalopy or something?'

'No, it's a good car, Diz, honest. Look out the window. It's a new four-door job with five thousand on it and a full tank. It ought to roll.'

'Says here you're manager of Pyramid Trucking Lines, Conroy. Ever get called back to the office?'

'Sometimes.'

Diz turned to Lauralee. 'You hold stupid's hand while Joe and I wander up to the booth and make us a phone call.' He put on trousers, shoes, and a jacket, slipped a gun into the jacket pocket. 'Put that sack down someplace, Joe. Let's go.'

Once they were outside he said, 'Nothing funny now. I'm going to hear both ends of this little chat. You met a guy from the office. Something has come up. Make up something logical. You'll have to work late.'

The booth was outside the motel office. Diz crowded in with Joe. The phone rang three times before Marty answered.

'Yes?'

'It's Joe, honey. Look, something came up. I checked at the terminal and I've got to go back for a while.'

'Will you kids hush! I can't hear your father. Did you say you have to go back to work? What's the trouble?'

'Usual thing. Too many rigs down, and we'll have to dig up a lease someplace to keep from faulting on a contract.'

'Did you get the groceries?'

'Yes.'

'Well, can't you bring them home before you go back?'

'This is sort of an emergency, hon.'

'You sound funny, Joe. Is anything wrong?'

'No. Everything is fine.'

'Danny, stop screeching! Mommie can't hear. Will you be late?'

'I guess so.'

'The Shermans were coming over after dinner.'

'Well, you better call Liz and cancel, hon.'

'You make sure you get something to eat, now. You're sure everything is all right?'

With enormous false heartiness he said, 'Everything is dandy. I'm just a little worried about the contract. See you, honey.'

'Goodbye, darling.'

He was sweating as he hung up. The conversation had been like a little window open on a sane and normal world. As soon as he hung up he was back in a fantasy place inhabited by Diz, by Ray, and by Lauralee. He wiped his brow, waiting.

'That was just fine, Joe boy. You're being real cool. Now suppose she tries to phone you at the terminal? Think she will?'

'I . . . I guess she might. To remind me to eat.'

'Then they better be ready to say you stepped out for a couple of minutes. Who can you call there?'

'Henry Gluckman, the dispatcher.'

'Well, leave us do so, ole Joe.'

Henry seemed baffled by Joe's request at first, and then he suddenly seemed to understand. 'I get it, Mr. Conroy. Sure thing. Have a ball, Mr. Conroy.'

Joe hung up and said, 'He thinks I've got a woman lined up.'

'It happens every day, Uncle Joe. Let's go back. I like you about a half step in front of me. Good.'

They went back into the room. It was a setup usually called family accommodations. Two rooms and a bath. Ray was scowling down into a stiff highball. Diz went over and took it lightly out of his hand, and when Ray looked up in sharp annoyance, reaching to retrieve the glass, Diz said, 'No more sauce, stupid. You might get another genius-type idea.'

'I told him to lay off,' Lauralee said.

'Shut up!' Ray barked at her.

'Watch Uncle Joe,' Diz said. He went into the next room

and came back with a roll of black tar tape. Joe Conroy was instructed to sit on the floor by the radiator, encircle a pipe with his arms, and clasp his hands. Diz wound his wrists and hands with the tape. Each encirclement made tighter pressure.

They don't do this, Joe thought. They tie you to a chair and you work the ropes loose. Nobody works this stuff loose. This is going to be a long day.

Once he was secure, they ignored him. They unfolded a road map on the bed and went over it carefully. Diz was the leader. He gave the orders. There was another piece of paper. Joe judged from the conversation that it was a sketch of a building.

'We spot the car here, motor running, lights out, Lauralee at the wheel. They close at eleven. They have the night deposit made up by midnight. Two of them take it in, the manager and some kind of clerk. They come out of the back. Their car is parked here. We'll be between the car and the hedge.

'Now get this, Ray. The minute we hit is when the fat one shoves the key in the car door. The other one will be holding the money bag. You come around the front, fast, gun in the left hand, blackjack in the right. And for God's sake, hit him right, not too hard and not too soft. I'll take the fat one.

'Then we unlock the car and dump them in so nobody sees them laying around. We throw the car keys into the yard and walk – get that – walk to Conroy's car. I'll take the wheel, Lauralee. You be ready to shove over. Ray, you'll have the money. You get in the back.'

'How much do you think there'll be?' Lauralee asked with a husky wistfulness.

'From the business they do, someplace between fifteen and twenty-five thousand.'

'It's about time,' Ray mumbled.

'Six weeks and all we've done is pay expenses,' Diz said. 'Somebody is a jinx.'

'Don't look at me,' Ray said. 'We did good until you picked her up, Diz.'

'If I drop anybody, I drop you. Maybe I drop you after we split this one, stupid.'

'I can do good by myself.'

'You do fine. Big operations. Mug jobs.'

Ray shrugged. 'How about dads?'

'If it's smooth we leave him here and they find him when they come to change the sheets. If it goes sour . . . we decide later.'

'I feel all empty in the middle,' Lauralee said.

Diz rumpled her hair. 'That's the name of the game, sweetheart. That's the kick.'

She kissed him thoroughly, kneading his back. 'How'll I look in mink?' she said.

'Like any other mink,' Ray said.

Diz and the girl got up and went into the other room, arms around each other's waists. The door closed softly behind them. Ray got the bottle and poured himself a drink.

'From what I've heard –'

'Shut up, dad.'

'I've heard that when you people team up with a woman, things go bad for you.'

Ray got up and came around the bed. Holding his drink carefully so as not to spill it, he kicked Joe in the ribs with a full hard swing of his leg. Joe felt the bone go and the pain sickened him. It shamed him to sit on the floor and be kicked like an animal. And for the first time he felt a true and genuine anger.

Ray sat on the bed again. 'Just don't talk,' he said. 'Just don't say word one.'

Each time Joe drew breath pain was a knife in his side. I should have started being a man when I had the chance, Joe thought. That kick could have killed me. It could have driven a splintered edge of bone into the lungs. Then Diz would have been very happy with Ray. Delighted with him.

And he began to have a vague idea. As it took more definite shape, he liked it better. If he merely endured, the choice was not good. The men with the money would be armed and wary. This trio had the smell of defeat about

them. If they killed one of the men, they would kill the other and come back and kill him. It would not go smoothly for them. Not with Ray drinking heavily. And the only chance seemed to be to increase the dissension between them.

He found the first step of his plan astoundingly hard to accomplish. He caught a fold of the inside of his cheek between his teeth, and for long moments he did not have the courage to do as he wished. Finally, bracing himself against the expected pain, he bit down as powerfully as he could and tasted the flow of blood into his mouth.

He chewed again and again, and then slumped over against the floor and made himself breathe in a heavy rasping way and let the blood run on to the floor. He kept his eyes closed. He heard Ray come over to him. The big hand took him by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

'Hey! Hey! Wake up!' Ray whispered.

Joe breathed in the same way. There was a long silence. Ray moved away from him.

'Hey, Diz.'

'Go away, stupid.'

'Diz, come here a minute.'

'Shut up, Ray.'

'Diz, you got to come here a minute.'

Joe heard the door open finally and knew that they had come over to him.

'What the hell happened?' Diz demanded, his voice taut with anger.

'I just kicked him a little. One time. Honest. He was talking too much.'

'Oh, you slob! Oh, you stupid, crazy jerk!'

Joe heard the quick suck of breath and knew the girl had come over and seen him. 'He's . . . bleeding.'

'The genius kicked him. He probably busted up his insides. The guy may be dying.'

'I . . . I don't like this,' Lauralee said. 'I don't like it.'

'A nice juicy kidnap murder,' Diz said. 'In this state they gas you. They drop it in a bucket under a chair.'

'Honest, Diz, I only – '

There was a sudden brutal splat of fist on flesh and something heavy fell against a bed and slid sideways.

'You didn't have to do that,' Ray said, his voice muffled.

'What're we gonna do?' Lauralee said, and Joe detected hysteria in her voice. He made his breathing more ragged.

'Lemme think,' Diz said. 'He may be going out right now.'

'We ought to get a doctor,' Lauralee said.

'That's a wonderful idea. That's a real good idea. The kind Ray has all the time.'

'Maybe we ought to anyway cut him loose and put him on the bed,' the girl said. 'Look at him bleed!'

They unwound the tape from his hands. He kept himself utterly limp. They carried him to the bed and put him down clumsily.

'Go get a towel or something,' Diz said.

'I just gave him one little kick in the ribs,' Ray said wonderingly.

'Shut up. I got to think. If he dies, we'll have to get him out of here. He'll have to be dumped someplace.'

'I didn't know I was going to get into anything like this. I don't like this,' Lauralee whined.

'Maybe he's faking,' Ray said. 'Give me that cigarette, honey,' Diz said.

Joe Conroy braced himself. He did not know where the pain would begin. It began on the back of his left hand. It was bright pain, fierce and sharp. He fought against the instinctive reflex. It lasted a little longer than forever, and finally stopped.

'He's not faking,' Diz said. 'He's in bad shape.'

'If it's going to happen anyway, let's finish it,' Ray said.

'No!' Lauralee cried.

'Shut up, honey. Who says it's going to happen anyway? I'm no doctor. You want a murder rap against you, Ray? Stop having ideas. Give me a chance to think.'

'It's driving me nuts, listening to him,' Ray said.

'Go in the other room and shut the door.'

'I want to know what –'

'Move, will you!'

'Okay, okay, okay.' Joe heard the door slam.

'What are you going to do?' the girl whispered nervously.

'Ray goofed it up. But I need him tonight. We can get along without you. You stay here with Conroy. Then we'll come back here. Dead or not, we'll take Conroy along. We'll find a side road and I'll have Ray help me drag him off in the brush. And . . . when I come back to the car, I'll be alone.'

'No, Diz!'

'Think of a better way. I can leave the gun in Conroy's hand. It'll confuse the law. And we'll switch cars as soon as we can.'

'I'm scared.'

'Don't be scared. Diz will fix everything nice for baby.'

It was a sizeable slice of eternity before the two men left. He heard his car drive away. Diz, before he left, had taped Joe's wrists and ankles. Joe opened his eyes and groaned. The girl came over to the bed.

'Water,' he gasped.

'Okay. I'll get some.' She came back with a glass. She held his head up and held the glass to his lips. 'You know, I was a nurse's aide once. I was going to go into nurse training, but it was too tough, you know what I mean? I'm sorry about Ray kicking you.'

He clasped his fingers together. 'Fix the pillow. Please,' he gasped.

'Sure thing.' She put the empty glass aside. Joe felt vastly guilty about what he was about to do. He had never struck a woman in his life. And he knew he could not be half-hearted about it.

His wrists were fastened together in front of him. She reached around him to tug at the pillow. He watched her chin carefully. When he judged it was in perfect position, he brought his clasped hands up as hard and as quickly as he could.

The force of the blow straightened her up and she fell against the other bed and bounced on to the floor. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. She came on to her hands and knees, face bleared and dazed. As she started

to push herself up, he struck her again, swinging his clasped hands sideways, striking the angle of her jaw.

He tried to hop to the door, but he lost his balance and fell. He wriggled the rest of the way, knelt and caught the knob, pulled himself up, unlocked the door, and hopped out into the night yelling as loudly as he could. He hopped four times and fell into the driveway, still hollering, as doors opened, and people were running . . .

At one in the morning, after the police surgeon had taped his cracked rib and packed the wound on the inside of his mouth, Detective Lieutenant Halverson, small and trim, came in as Joe Conroy was putting his shirt back on.

'Delivered the car to your wife. Told her I'd bring you home, but she's going to get a sitter somehow and come down for you.'

'You got them, then.'

Halverson leaned against a file cabinet and lit a cigarette. 'Wouldn't have, if you hadn't overheard the name of the supermarket they were going to knock off. When we put the floods on them they got rattled. So the girl is in a cell, and the big blond punk is in the police morgue, and the one with the sideburns is on the operating table. We don't have the history yet, but it will be coming through soon. Now I've got time for your end of the story.'

Joe told him - and the words came hard.

Halverson nodded when he finished. 'Smart,' he said.

'I'm a real hero,' Joe said. 'She was being a roadshow Florence Nightingale and I sucker-punched her beautifully.'

'So you wish you'd tried to climb the boys instead, so Monday your wife could be picking out a box with bronze handles?'

'Not that. But . . .'

'I know what you mean. Both papers want to talk to you. How will you handle it?'

'I managed to get away. That's enough.'

And that's all he told them. But he told Marty all of it. And he didn't start to shake with reaction until he was at last

home and safe, and then he took the pills he hadn't thought he would need.

Sunday, except for all the phone calls, was like any other Sunday. Almost like any other Sunday. Just like every day from now on would be almost like the days that had gone before. With one little exception. For Joe Conroy life had become a little more valuable because it could not so readily be taken for granted.

There was evil loose in the world, random and brutal as summer lightning. And this time his luck had been like a coin found in the street. He read the funnies to the kids, and, with an awkward gladness, kissed Marty more often than was his habit.

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